

SLAYERS

4 *The Battle of Saillune*



BY HAJIME KANZAKA
ILLUSTRATIONS BY RUI ARAIZUMI

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1: Typical! Wherever We Go, Drama Finds Us

The palace stood silent against the night, backed by the moon and stars. Watchtowers flanked its huge closed gate, illuminated here and there with pale magical lights—probably Lighting spells.

“We’ll sneak in this way,” I whispered, my back pressed against one of the trees along the side of the lane.

“You mean... through the front gate?!” Gourry asked uncertainly, similarly pressed against a tree.

Just to be clear, we’re not burglars or anything. I mean, yeah, we *were* dressed so suspiciously that passersby would be justified throwing rocks at us... Y’know, your standard body-concealing coats and pants secured in place with leather belts, plus masks that hid our entire faces except for our eyes. And yes, okay, they were all black! We also both had swords hanging off our belts, which sort of clinched the whole “evil assassin” look.

But listen... not to brag or anything, but I, Lina Inverse, would never sink low enough to do that kind of dirty work. If I’m ever short on funds, blowing up bandit hideouts is both way more profitable and way less illegal (I think?).

“It’s the last thing they’ll be expecting!” I assured Gourry.

“Maybe there’s a good reason for that!” he argued.

“Quit complaining and get moving already!” I said, striding for the gate.

“It certainly is more tense here than I expected,” Sylphiel said quietly as she sipped her after-meal tea. Her long, sleek, black hair rustled slightly with the gesture. She was a

delicate beauty whose clerical vestments suited her all too well. I figured she was probably a little older than me.

We (me, Sylphiel, and Gourry) were presently in a small restaurant. The food was decent, as was the clientele, but the atmosphere was decidedly dour—and that went for more than just the restaurant. See, we were currently in Saillune City, capital of the Holy Kingdom of Saillune, which was in the grips of a scandal. We weren't here to rubberneck, however. Gourry and I had met Sylphiel in a separate kerfuffle, and she'd asked us to be her bodyguards on her journey to Saillune to stay with some relatives.

"Still..." Gourry whispered low. Gourry was my traveling companion, a handsome and superlatively skilled swordsman who I sometimes suspected had goo for brains.
"Why's the city so on edge?"

Clunk... I unwittingly dropped my fork. Sylphiel stared in disbelief.

"R-Really, Gourry?" I pressed my fingers to my aching temples. "Are you telling me you have *no idea* what's going on here right now?"

"I have absolutely *no idea!*"

"Guuugh! Sylphiel and I were talking about it nonstop the whole way here!"

"Aw, you little scamp! You really thought I was listening to all that?"

"Don't act proud of it! Darn it..." I said, mussing my hair in frustration. Meanwhile, Sylphiel remained frozen in shock.

"Well, never mind. The simplest way to put it is that the city is deep in the throes of some family drama."

"Oh?"

"Six months ago, the king collapsed of illness. And though he's still in his right mind, he's bedridden. According to rumor, anyway."

"Huh..."

"Obviously, the situation has led to all kinds of speculation about who the next king should be. And then

little incidents began cropping up here and there."

"Ahh..."

Are you really listening to me, dude? Because if not, I'm gonna get violent. Don't test me.

I managed to keep my composure and continued explaining, "It started with an attempt on the life of the king's heir, followed by the assassinations of a few higher-ups. Then the king's heir went missing from the palace... He's probably hiding somewhere in town. The result is that soldiers and shady figures have the streets packed day and night. You follow?"

"Can't say I do."

"Graaagh! Youuu!"

"Waaah! Calm down, Lina! I was joking! Just joking! I follow! Please! Don't get violent!"

"Hahh... hahh..." I panted, but managed to catch my breath.

"May I ask, Mistress Lina, why you call him 'the king's heir'?" inquired Sylphiel, who had finally regained use of her faculties, with a puzzled furrow of her brow.

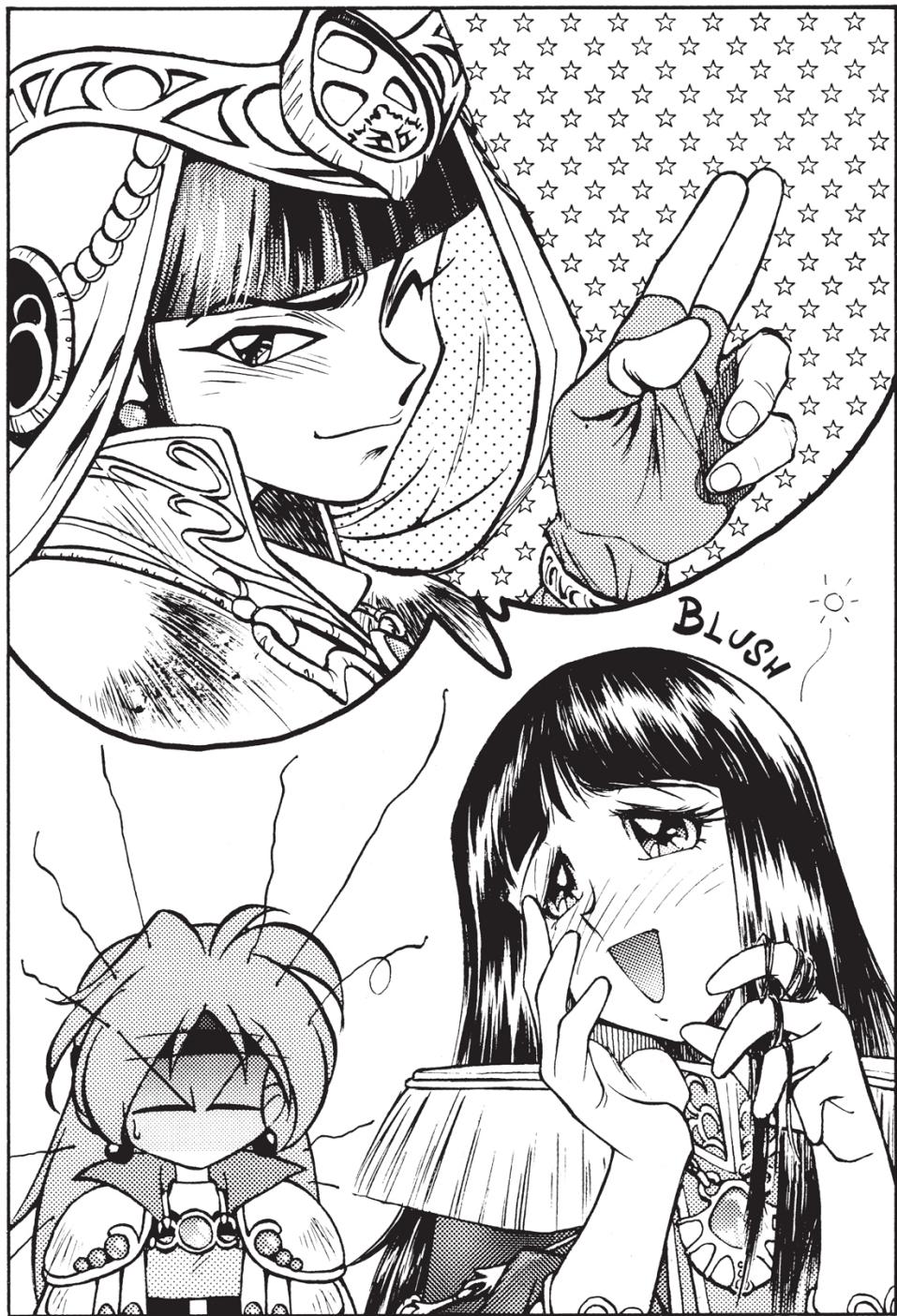
I mirrored the expression and asked, "What do you mean? He's the next in line for the throne, so..."

"I mean... I was just wondering why you refer to him in those specific terms. Most would simply call him the prince, no?"

Twitch! That comment gave me a full-on facial spasm.

"Yeah... I guess," I admitted reluctantly, finally managing to wrench the words from my throat.

"Ah," she said with a dreamy gaze. "The prince of Saillune, city of white magic, driven from the palace by assassins, hiding somewhere in town... Surely he must be a wonderful person."



Crash! I fell over in my chair.

“H-Hey, Lina! What’s wrong with you?!”

“What happened?”

“...Nothing...”

I picked myself up, trying my darndest to look unaffected. The truth was that I’d met the king’s heir before, and... Well, we could save that story for another time. No need to burst Sylphiel’s bubble.

“S-So just to be sure, Sylphiel... you told your relatives when you’d be arriving, right?” I asked, forcing a change in subject.

“Y-Yes. I contacted them via the courier at Kanon City earlier.”

“And you’re gonna work at one of the temples around here now?” I went rapid-fire on the questions to keep her from asking any herself.

“I certainly hope so. The truth is, my uncle serves as both a local priest and magical doctor. But I don’t wish to be a burden, so I’d very much like to find work for myself. Granted, given the state of the city right now, I don’t know how easy that will be...”

“Hey, once things calm down a little, I’m sure you’ll be able to do anything you want.”

Whew! Disaster conversation avoided!

“There. That building with the brown roof,” Sylphiel said, pointing.

We were now in the center of the city, near the palace, on the kind of big avenue that would ordinarily be overflowing with stalls and sightseers, but, owing to the times, was currently only populated by a few odd stragglers. The air was so still we could even smell the little flowers blooming along the lane.

Down the way, I could see the high walls that encircled the palace. The house Sylphiel indicated was to our right. It wasn’t especially large, but it seemed like a nice place. Well

built. Needless to say, it was where Sylphiel's relatives lived.

She glanced back at me, then turned her eyes to Gourry.

"Um... would you please accompany me?" she asked meekly.

"Oh, uh, sure," Gourry answered, scratching at his cheek as he cast a glance in my direction.

"Yeah, we should go say hi to your relatives," I said.

Our job was only to make sure she got to the city, and she'd paid us in advance. There would have been no hard feelings if we split ways here. But I knew Sylphiel had to be nervous since she didn't know these relatives of hers all that well. Besides, it would be better if Gourry and I were there to explain how she'd ended up in this mess in the first place... seeing as we were sorta responsible for it.

And so we passed through the property gate together. Sylphiel rapped the wolf head door knocker a few times, then waited. No answer.

"Could they be out?" she asked, her head cocked to the side as she reached for the knocker again.

It was then we at last heard the sound of someone stirring inside. A few moments later, a middle-aged man cracked the door open and peeked out. Despite the streaks of white in his hair, he didn't look especially old. His face was keen and wary... but his expression changed the moment he laid eyes on Sylphiel.

"Oh! Sylphiel!" he exclaimed, immediately all smiles as he threw the door open wide.

"It's been a long time, Uncle Grey," she responded with a smile.

"It certainly has. My goodness, you were a child the last time I saw you... What a beautiful young lady you've become! Anyway, do come in. Let's not stand around—" His friendly demeanor suddenly turned suspicious when he laid eyes on me and Gourry. "Who are these people?"

Sylphiel looked back at us in turn and replied, "Oh, meet Mistress Lina and Master Gourry. They helped me in Sairaag

and protected me on the way here.”

“In that case... thank you.” Master Grey continued to stand there in the entrance, a troubled expression on his face. He didn’t seem particularly happy to see us. Granted, to him, we probably looked like your average mercenary drifters. “I really must compensate you for your trouble.”

“No, she’s given us enough already, honestly,” I said awkwardly.

“They were involved in the incident in Sairaag with me,” Sylphiel interjected. “I thought perhaps they could explain what happened.”

“I... I see.”

With that, Master Grey craned his neck around the inside of the house, looking strangely unsettled.

Hmm... getting some real unwelcoming vibes here...

“Well, I suppose we could go to a local cafe...” he muttered.

“Uncle...” Sylphiel said, almost pleadingly.

She was frowning, clearly displeased with this turn of events. I took the opportunity to step in.

“No, don’t trouble yourself. We just wanted to introduce ourselves, but you seem rather busy. We’ll be taking our leave, then...”

“Mistress Lina!” Sylphiel objected.

“No, nothing of the sort!” Master Grey declared, looking a little panicked. “It’s really nothing, I’m just... Oh, I know! The house is rather messy. If you’ll just wait here a minute...”

Wait, what was with that “Oh, I know”? Probably best not to read too much into it... the man slammed the door in our faces, and I could hear his footsteps dashing away.

“I wonder what could have possessed him,” Sylphiel muttered uncertainly, then rested back against a pillar on the porch.

Some time later, I heard the hasty steps approach again and Master Grey poked his head out of the door once more.

“So sorry for the wait. Do come in,” he said, beckoning us

in with a slightly strained smile.

Gourry and I exchanged a glance, then shrugged.

"Welcome to our humble abode. Make yourselves right at home," the wife said as she served us tea with a strained smile to match her husband's.

"Thank you for your hospitality," I said as I took a sip.

The three of us had been shown to their parlor.

"Might I ask, where's Tran?" Sylphiel asked Master Grey.

"Oh, my son? He got married a while back. He opened up a magical pharmacy a little way from here, though he still comes to visit from time to time. So, what exactly happened in Sairaag?" he asked, blatantly speeding the conversation along.

"Oh, where should I start? I suppose Mistress Lina should explain," Sylphiel said, suddenly turning the spotlight on me.

Hmm... I guess this went all the way back to how I met Gourry. I'd have to abridge things a little though, or else this was gonna take us all night.

"Let's see. Me, Gourry, and this other guy—"

But just as I started my story...

"You! You're that magical girl!" called a loud, gravelly voice.

I whipped around and—*Erk!*—I could've dropped dead on the spot. A grubby old man was leaning out of the halfway open door to the next room. He was big and imposing, with a stout build that made him look like an oversized dwarf. He was about forty, bearded, and wearing clothes that seemed a little too small for his frame. If you handed him a crummy weapon and slapped some rusty armor on him, he'd look like your typical bandit.

And yes, I knew him.

"You've met?" Master Grey asked hesitantly.

Sylphiel and her aunt were also looking back and forth between me and the old man repeatedly. Gourry was the

only one who seemed completely unfazed by the situation. I knew this wasn't due to any particular generosity of spirit, however. Obliviousness was just kind of his natural state of being.

"Hrmm... Some time ago, yes." The old guy nodded calmly. "She's trustworthy."

"I see," Master Grey said with a big sigh of relief as he leaned back in his chair.

"Er... Uncle?" Sylphiel asked warily. "Just who is this man?"

"Oh, that's... This has to stay quiet, all right?" Master Grey said, righting himself. He then continued in a soft but clear voice, "That is Sir Philionel El Di Saillune, first in line for the throne of the Holy Kingdom of Saillune."

...

"What...?" Sylphiel squeaked, then turned to me creakily. "That's... the... prince?"

I replied with a firm, pained, sympathetic nod, "Yup." Sylphiel fainted dead away.

Once the introductions were out of the way and I'd finished rehashing what went down in Sairaag, Master Grey's wife finally came downstairs again.

"Oh, Maria. How's Sylphiel faring?" Master Grey asked.

"She's resting peacefully now," she replied with a small smile. "She spent quite a long time tossing and turning, though..."

"I'm sure her exhaustion just caught up with her now that we're here safe and sound," I said.

"Hm, perhaps," Master Grey mused in a strangely aged tone.

Obviously, that was an excuse. She'd actually fainted from shock trying to reconcile the Prince Charming of her imagination with the grungy forty-year-old dude she was just presented with. Not surprising that it was too much for her to take in. She was at a sensitive age, after all.

I'd run into the guy once while he was traveling in disguise, and we'd teamed up to take care of a certain incident... but *good grief* he was a lot to deal with. I was of course forced to suffer the same rude awakening Sylphiel was just treated to, but moreover, the guy had a way of sucking the air out of any room he was in.

"All right. Now it's my turn to share," Sir Phil said, nodding deeply at nothing before beginning his own story.

He was apparently attacked by assassins but managed to "persuade" them to withdraw... and they retaliated by going and attacking his retainers instead. So, to draw the assassins' attention, the concerned Sir Phil then slipped the palace and secreted himself away here. As he'd hoped, the assassins had been focused on tracking him down ever since...

This all explained why Master Grey was so reluctant to let us inside. We were total strangers, after all, and he didn't want us to discover what—or who, rather—he was really hiding here.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble, Grey."

"Your Highness... you needn't apologize to me."

I guess calling him "Your Highness" felt less wrong than outright calling him a prince. Not sure why I was so struck by that, but I was.

"And so, Lina, Gourry," Sir Phil said, turning to face us again, "I was hoping you might honor my request."

The two of us exchanged a look. It was unlikely we were going to be able to refuse this so-called request... but it sure sounded like it was gonna be a huge pain in the rear.

"We'll hear you out, but we can't promise anything," I hedged.

"That's fine. I mentioned before that I slipped out of the palace, but my allies seem to fear I may have met my demise. I want to send them some reassurance. Grey here goes to work at the palace temple once every five days, but leaving the contact to him seems risky."

"I see..." I whispered, folding my arms.

If you wanted to secretly make contact with someone in the palace, you couldn't exactly waltz in the front gate. Would we have to wait for these allies to leave the palace first? No, that would never work. Under the current circumstances, no way in hell was anyone leaving the palace without an escort. That meant infiltration was our only option...

Might be fun.

"There are two people I want to reach. You can make contact with either one, and have them pass the message on to the other. Neither leaves the palace very often, however, so you'll have to sneak in to find them. That is, assuming you take the job. I know it's rather dangerous..."

"Say," Gourry piped up with a rare question, "who's behind all the assassinations? Do you know?"

I was curious myself, of course. But if Sir Phil named the conspirators... we'd already be in too deep. We'd essentially be boxed in to taking the job.

Fortunately, all he said was: "I have an idea. More precisely, there's really only one person it could be... But I have no proof."

"So you want us to take him out while we're in the palace?" I asked, thinking it was a pretty good idea myself.

Yet Sir Phil fell silent for a little while, then rumbled softly, "I believe I've told you before, but I am a pacifist. I doubt we can resolve things peacefully after all that's happened, but however I'm forced to deal with him in the end, I at least want proof that he was responsible first."

Hmm... that was a big ask. Point me at a bad guy, and I'll beat him up no problem. But petty little details like "proof"? That wasn't really my style.

"Now, as for the people I want you to contact... Well, I can tell you all that if you agree. Just to be clear, I know this is dangerous work. You're free to decline. I won't force your hand."

Whew... I let out a sigh, a wry smile on my face, and said, “But it really wouldn’t be right to back out after everything we’ve heard, would it?”

“You have my thanks,” Sir Phil said. No matter who he was talking to, he was never too good for a simple thank you. It was one of his better traits. “In that case, allow me to continue. One of the people I want you to contact is my valet Clophel. The other is Amelia.”

“A woman?” I asked.

Sir Phil showed a hint of uncharacteristic bashfulness and clarified, “Yes, well... My daughter, actually.”

“Daughter?!” Gourry and I exclaimed in unison.

A terrifying vision flashed through my mind. The thought of Sir Phil’s daughter... Would she end up looking just like him? Ooh, or would the twist be that she was a total knockout? Darn. Now that I’d gotten my hopes up, I was gonna be even more heartbroken if she turned out to be a dead ringer for her old man...

“She’s quite pretty,” Master Grey said, apparently having read my mind. He then added in a whisper, “She takes after her mother.”

“Speaking of, where is your wife, if I may ask?” I inquired.

Sir Phil flashed a sad smile and said, “Oh, she passed some time ago.”

Ah...

“S-Sorry to hear that.”

“Think nothing of it.”

A heavy silence fell over the room. Leave it to Gourry, however, to finally break it.

“So... who do you think’s behind it all?” he asked.

“Christopher Wil Brogg Saillune, the second in line to the throne,” Sir Phil muttered. “In other words... my younger brother.”

The air became decidedly heavier.

And that’s the story of how we ended up sneaking into the palace in the middle of the night like common burglars.

Dressed in clothes as black as the night itself, we began our mission. I used Levitation to slowly pass over the soldiers watching the front gate, then, while hugging the wall like a gecko, I ascended. Surely there would be lookouts atop the gate as well. Maybe I should've picked a different way in after all...

But it was a bit too late to look back now, and stressing over the details was a surefire path to self-sabotage. Fortunately, it seemed I was in the clear—there wasn't a soul stationed on top of the gate. Careless of them; good for me.

I cast a glance over the palace grounds. Obviously, Sir Phil had explained the general layout in advance, but I still needed to get a feel for it myself and evaluate security around the joint.

At the center of the massive lawn stood a fancy-looking temple, apparently used for official functions like coronations. There were small buildings on either side of it—dormitories. The one on the right was for priests, the one on the left for shrine maidens.

Amelia should be in the shrine maiden dorm. Apparently, she was the head shrine maiden around here. The notion conjured images of a lovely young lady in my head... but, I reminded myself, she was still Sir Phil's daughter. I couldn't let my guard down.

Beyond the temple stood the main palace, where Sir Phil used to live. That was where we would find his valet Clophel, as well as Christopher the alleged mastermind.

Light pierced the darkness from atop posts set up throughout the garden and all the buildings scattered across the massive lawn, but it couldn't entirely dispel the black of night. Security in the garden seemed fairly light as well. The royal guard was probably concentrated in the palace and the temple.

Common sense dictated that Amelia would be easier to reach, which was why I'd made the decision to go for Clophel

instead. Our enemy knew that Sir Phil was still alive, after all, and that he would likely try and contact his daughter. They would be guarding her strictly—and covertly.

Conversely, the palace was essentially the enemy's home base. Their ringleader was there, and the place was watched at all hours. You'd have to be downright insane to try to sneak in...

"By the way, Gourry, there's something I have to tell you," I whispered softly to my blond companion, who was hiding on top of the gate with me.

"What is it? And why'd you wait until now to bring it up?"

"If things go south at any point, my attack spells aren't gonna help us much. They're only going to work at about half power while we're here."

Gourry replied softly, almost with a groan in his voice, "Really? That time of the month again?"

...

"N-No!" I said, flailing my arms as I felt my face turning beet red.

Why... Why in the world would you bring that up now?!

I wanted to shout, but worked hard to keep my voice low: "It's the shape of the city! It reduces the strength of my offensive spells!"

"Wha? How come?"

"Well... a few reasons."

"Don't just leave it at that! Explain."

Oh, yeah? You want me to explain, huh?

"Okay then, first, the city districts are laid out like a magic circle. A big six-pointed star. You know what a six-pointed star is, right?"

"Of course I do. It's two triangles put together."

"Oh, wow! You're so smart, Gourry!"

"...Do you think I'm stupid or something?"

"Always have, buddy. Anyway, this palace lies at the center of that six-pointed star. Still with me?"

"Yeah."

"In magic, the six-pointed star represents a stable flow of power. In other words, balance. By contrast, an inverted five-pointed star represents imbalance—a flow of power that defies natural order. And an upright five-pointed star, then, represents the purging of that power. Got all that?"

"...Y-Yeah..."

"As long as they're small and aren't magically enhanced, these symbols don't have any effect. But at much larger scales, they can create magical barriers proportionate to their size."

"..."

"In other words, the city of Saillune itself is a giant barrier and we're smack dab in the middle of it. Obviously, its effect is huge. But while it amplifies the power of white magic—which is all about balance—it has the opposite effect on black magic, which draws its power from chaos. That said, it doesn't interfere as much as a pentagram designed specially to banish evil would. I think that's about everything.

Understand?"

"I shouldn't have asked..." he conceded readily.

Incidentally, the one who laid the city out in such a fashion was a certain white magic specialist who served as an aide to the first king of Saillune. Just FYI.

"Now... let's get going," I said, renewing my Levitation spell.

With that, we landed inside the palace grounds and started slinking through the breezy night. We gave a wide berth to the pools of light on the lawn and avoided the eyes of the guards. It was actually pretty exciting. I had to wonder if the bandits of the world out there fell into their way of life seeking out this kind of thrill...

Still, no matter their reasons, I could never approve of stealing from innocent people. It was only open season, in my book, when it came to corrupt leaders and murderous thieves. But since most bandits didn't similarly limit themselves, I figured they were largely just self-serving

cowards.

Anyhoo, getting close to the main palace was easy, but our biggest problem still lay ahead. The place was basically packed with sentries. Not just at the entrances, either. They were everywhere. Apparently Lord Clophel's room was on the third floor, so I figured we'd probably have to get there via Levitation... but there the building itself was dotted with Lighting torches and there were guards on every veranda. They'd easily spot me and Gourry flying up there.

While I was hiding in the grass at the edge of the light and thinking things over, Gourry, who was crouched beside me, piped up.

"Say, Lina, can't you use magic to summon a big bird or something to distract them?"

"Nope," I said plainly. "If they have anyone who can detect magic, that would be like sounding the alarm."

"But you've cast Levitation a bunch of times already..."

"Levitation's a pretty weak spell. You see all those Lighting spells around the place? With all the magic those puppies put out, a cantrip like Levitation wouldn't even register. But summoning and attack spells use a whopping load of power. Besides..."

"Besides?"

"While I can use a few summoning spells, they're not really my cup of tea."

"How come?"

"Why do you think?" I said, firmly. "They take the focus off of me."

In the end, we chose the most mundane of plans: Levitating as high as we could out of sight, then coming in for a touchdown on the palace roof. The main building was five stories, so we'd have to make it down two floors to reach Lord Clophel's room. The task was easier said than done, but it was the only option we had.

Once we landed on the roof, we took a peek in through

several of the skylights. There was one room that seemed deserted, which felt like a trap to me. So instead, we picked out a room where a rotund older woman—presumably a maid—was out cold sawing logs.

I pulled some thin steel plates and a pin from my pants pocket, and proceeded to unlock the window.

"Hey... are you a cat burglar on the sly or something?" Gourry asked, more suspicious of than impressed by my lockpicking.

"Oh, c'mon. Such skills are a necessity for modern ladies."

"You liar."

"Whatever. We're going in," I said, cracking open the skylight and slipping into the room below.

The plush carpet helped us hit the ground quietly. The old lady remained fast asleep. I approached the door, listened outside, then slowly opened it.

A long hallway stretched out to either side of us, illuminated here and there with Lighting. And seated in a chair just outside the door to the empty room we'd spotted before was a napping soldier. I knew it was a trap! Buuut I also knew that bucko here wasn't supposed to be sleeping on the job. I cast a Sleeping spell on him to make sure he stayed down for the count, and then we snuck by.

We made it to the stairway, which appeared to be just as unguarded as most of the hall. I cast a look down it, sensing a group of presences pretty far below us. The mastermind, Christopher, must be down on the first floor...

Still, the place seemed strangely defenseless. Maybe the baddies hadn't really thought all this through, but wouldn't common sense demand a *little* more in the way of caution? Either way, Gourry and I continued to creep along, putting several soldiers to sleep as we went. We ultimately reached the third floor without much ado.



I was liking this less and less. Could it be...?

"What do you think, Gourry?" I asked while walking down the perfectly straight, deserted hallway.

"I don't like it. It feels like a trap, but I can't quite get my head around it."

"I guess we'll just have to see it through. We'll sneak into Lord Clophel's room, and then we need to make sure it's really him. So just stay quiet and let me handle that part."

"Got it. I'll leave the strategizing stuff to you."

If our enemy was clever, they would have moved Lord Clophel to another room and replaced him with a double to intercept any messengers from Sir Phil—in other words, us—in an attempt to discover his whereabouts.

I unlocked the door to Lord Clophel's quarters the same way I had the skylight, cracked it open, and slipped inside. I closed it for good measure behind us, just for the record.

We found ourselves in a two-room chamber. In the further room was an old man asleep in a bed painted by the moonlight streaming through the windows. He matched Sir Phil's description of his valet, but we'd never met the guy before, so we couldn't be sure it was him. To confirm, I quietly unsheathed my sword and placed my left hand over his mouth.

He jerked awake in a flash. I held my sword right to his throat and hissed at him to keep his voice down. Then, slowly, I removed my hand from his mouth.

"Clophel?" I asked.

At that, he loudly cleared his throat. He then gasped, both his eyes open wide, "Are you... assassins from Christopher?!"

All right, he was the real deal after all. A fake would've tried to tell me I had the wrong guy. I nodded to Gourry, then sheathed my sword. Lord Clophel looked between us, his eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Sorry about that. We had to make sure it was really you," I explained.

"Just who are you people?" he asked.

"We have a message from Sir Philionel," Gourry said.

"His Highness?!" Lord Clophel exclaimed, quickly sitting up.

"Hush! Keep it down! He just wanted to tell you he's safe."

"Ohh..." he exhaled joyously. He then said, nearly on the verge of tears, "I see... So he's all right? I'm so, so very glad... Where is he— No, no. I'd better not ask his location."

"Smart thinking. Could you please pass word along to Lady Amelia too? I think it would be too risky for us to go see her."

"It would be indeed... and you really should be going now. You mustn't linger too long here. I'll let Lady Amelia know. And please tell His Highness to be careful. We'll hold out just fine in his absence."

"Got it. See you, then," I said, making a quick exit with Gourry.

Obviously, we were still on our guard. We carefully retraced our steps, and just as we hit the stairs...

Bwoom!

There was a huge explosion outside. Panic immediately swept the palace. I could hear soldiers all around us sounding the alarm...

"What was that?!"

"What happened?"

"Don't panic! Back to your posts! Leave this to the guards outside!"

But I wasn't about to sit back and listen to the details. Gourry and I dashed up the stairs and rushed into the original room we'd dropped down into. Despite all the commotion, the old lady was still snoring away.

I was definitely curious about what was going on outside, but getting to safety was our first priority. I grabbed hold of Gourry and used Levitation to get us up through the skylight, then landed on the roof and closed it behind us. Of course, I couldn't exactly lock it again.

Now, all we have to do is float our way to—

Before I could finish that thought, Gourry clicked his tongue and drew his sword. His eyes were fixed on a man... high in the air above us.

A sorcerer?!

“Finished with your business?” the mystery man asked in a mocking tone.

He was probably around thirty, and stood in the air against a starlit backdrop with his long cape fluttering in the night wind. I suppose you could say he was handsome, but the long scar trailing down his right cheek—and more importantly, the icy expression on his face—squandered his looks. Given his appearance and the way he’d shown up, I pegged him for an enemy right away. (That’s right. I judge books by their covers.)

Ah, this must be the guy responsible for the explosion out here...

He’d probably spotted us entering the palace and was waiting to ambush us here. The explosion was just a diversion to cause panic and keep us from noticing him. Whatever he was up to, however, our best move was to flee. I grabbed Gourry by the hand and incanted my high-speed flight spell.

“Lei Wing!”

With that, we’d be too fast for the sorcerer to catch with Levitation. Its natural barrier would also protect us from simple spells like Flare Arrow.

But the moment our feet left the roof...

Fwoom!

We were hit by a jolt—from above! I nearly blacked out, but I barely managed to keep control of my spell. Still, the impact had forced me into a quick deceleration and an emergency landing in the middle of the lawn... smack in the middle of all the soldiers.

A second shockwave hit us, so powerful that it would have crushed us if not for Lei Wing’s wind barrier. For this guy to

be able to cast a spell that powerful *while* using Levitation... He was really something else.

The sight of people falling out of the sky, however, understandably rattled the guards.

“What now?!”

“Intruders!”

They moved to surround us, keeping a fairly wide berth.

“Ow, ow, ow...”

“Whew...”

Gourry and I managed to pick ourselves up.

“Who are you people?!” one of the soldiers, apparently the captain, asked us.

Gourry frantically waved one hand and assured the man, “Oh, no need to worry. We don’t mean you any harm.”

It was hardly convincing, given the naked blade in his other hand. *This guy, I swear...*

“Could you leave them to me, Captain Lazeth?” asked a voice from on high.

The whole lot of us looked up. It was the sorcerer from before, descending to the ground with a cold smile on his face.

“Kanzel, eh?” the captain said with an open scowl. They seemed to know each other, and not in an exceptionally fond capacity. “This is a job for the captain of the royal guard.”

“Let him, Lazeth,” came a voice from another direction.

Two figures were now approaching from the main palace building. The first was a good-looking guy about forty. He was rather on the scrawny side with a bit of an effeminate air, but handsome nonetheless (just not my type). Behind him was what looked like a younger version of the same guy—presumably his son. Not surprisingly, it was the older of the two who’d called out to the captain.

“Ah... b-but...”

“Lazeth, as you reminded us all before, you are the captain of the royal guard. That means you follow my royal

commands, does it not?"

At that, the captain fell silent. This told me two things about the handsome older gent. One, he was a handsome older jerk. And two, he was probably Christopher.

"Now, if you'll allow me..." Kanzel said, extending his right hand out toward us in preparation to cast a spell. "I shall kill them."

Say whaaaaaaaaat?! I was expecting a "capture them and get them to tell us where Sir Phil is" sort of deal, but no! We're jumping straight to the *death penalty*?! That surprised even me. Prince Handsome seemed pretty shocked too.

"W-Wait a minute! Kanzel! What are you—"

Light was already coalescing in the sorcerer's right hand. Damn, he finished that spell awfully quick!

"Die!" he shouted.

The instant the light shot from his hand... Gourry and I took to the air once more! I wasn't just sitting there while they plotted our fate, I'll have you know! I'd spent their talky-time on another Lei Wing, then waited for the opportunity to unleash it...

Kanzel wouldn't be able to launch a second blast in time. We were already on our way to the western gate! But then...

Vrrm! A red light streaked through the night sky.

"Gwuh!" Gourry let out a muffled scream.

"What happened?!"

"My leg... It's just a scratch, though. Don't worry," he said reassuringly.

For that red light to have pierced my barrier, though... Whoever fired it was one nasty strong sorcerer. I could tell Gourry was hurting way worse than he let on, but go figure. That was one powerful attack.

"Don't worry. I'll get you home soon," I said as I hurried onward.

"...And that's basically how it went." I finished my story as I set my teacup on the table the next morning. After

escaping from the palace, we'd spent the night at Master Grey's house, where he patched up Gourry's leg. "We fled in a random direction to throw them off, and I made sure Gourry wasn't leaving a trail of blood for them to follow."

"I've caused you so much trouble. I'm sorry. You were even injured for my sake..." Sir Phil apologized sincerely.

"It's nothing, really," Gourry responded breezily.

But in truth, it was a bit of an ordeal. That magic beam only grazed Gourry's leg... but it had cut him to the bone. I was glad Master Grey was a powerful magical doctor, because there was no way my Recovery spell alone could've fixed that up.

Incidentally, it was just the four of us in the house right now. Sylphiel was still asleep, and Master Grey's wife had gone shopping in town.

"So that middle-aged prettyboy was Christopher, right?" I asked.

"Yes," Sir Phil replied with a firm nod. "I'm sure you can see the resemblance."

Not at all, actually, but...

"What about the young man who looked just like him?"

"Chris's son, Alfred. But the real problem is that Kanzel fellow... Chris said he was an old friend, but I know he was lying. It was when Chris invited him to stay at the palace that all this started."

"You think he's the one giving the orders to the assassins?" Gourry asked.

"Most likely. But while I can believe Chris would bring such a man into the palace to further his ambitions, and even try to kill me... to assassinate my friends and colleagues?! I don't care if he's my brother— No, it's because he's my brother that I can't forgive him!"

"So, what now?" I asked Sir Phil. "You can't hole up here forever, and if you want proof of his schemes, it means going back to the palace. We can't just keep sneaking in there on a nightly basis..."

"Indeed, that's the problem." Sir Phil folded his arms thoughtfully. "I know that, at some point, I must return home and confront the situation myself. But if I go back now, he'll think he has me right where he wants me... and he may resume his attacks on my retainers. That would mean all of my efforts were for nothing. So instead, I need to wait for the right time and opportunity to return."

Bang! It was then that we heard the door fly open.

"Emergency!" came a shout.

It was the missus of the house, back from shopping in a fluster. She ran inside, as white as a sheet.

"What's wrong, Maria?!" Master Grey asked hurriedly, exchanging a glance with Sir Phil.

"I was in town and there... there was an announcement from the palace. They said that, last night, Lord Clophel was contacted by suspected assassins... He's been arrested!"

"What?!" the whole group shouted.

"They're pinning the recent assassinations on him. Prince Christopher means to punish him severely..."

"Damn that Chris! He was just waiting for me to make a move..." Sir Phil huffed in frustration.

"I'm sorry. If only we hadn't been caught..." Gourry apologized.

"No, it's not your fault. This just means..." With an indomitable smile, Sir Phil stood up from his seat. "It's time to take action!"

"In that case..." Gourry began.

"...I think we'll join you," I concluded as we both stood up.

It seemed our actions had played right into the enemy's hands. This was no time to dust ourselves off and say, "Well, our work here is done! See ya!"

"Thank you," Sir Phil said with a resolute nod.

"Open the gate! Philionel El Di Saillune has returned!" Sir Phil bellowed.

One of the guards quickly leaped through the sentry door

and then, with a creak, the grand palace gate opened inward. Sir Phil strode boldly through, with Gourry and I trailing behind him.

Sir Phil was dressed in layered silk robes that were elegantly decorated with gold embroidery and the royal crest. It was a pretty classy look that, to be honest, didn't suit its wearer in the slightest. As a parting gift, Master Grey had outfitted Gourry with some loose-fitting hemp clothes, which he was wearing under his usual iron serpent breastplate and longsword.

As for me, I was wearing a new robe I'd picked up here in the city, black pants, and a black cape with some mithril threads woven in. And atop it all, I had new delicately gold-adorned pauldrons made from layers of mithril and shaved-down dragon bones. There was also my staple black bandanna, shortsword, and jeweled amulets in all the important places to complete the look.

"Who are these two?" one of the soldiers asked, clearly staring at us.

"Allies," Sir Phil said without explanation.

He then continued to stride into the palace. The soldiers all shouted out when they saw him, gathering around in glee.

"His Highness!"

"His Highness has returned!"

Seemed Sir Phil was pretty well liked around here.

"Hmm...?"

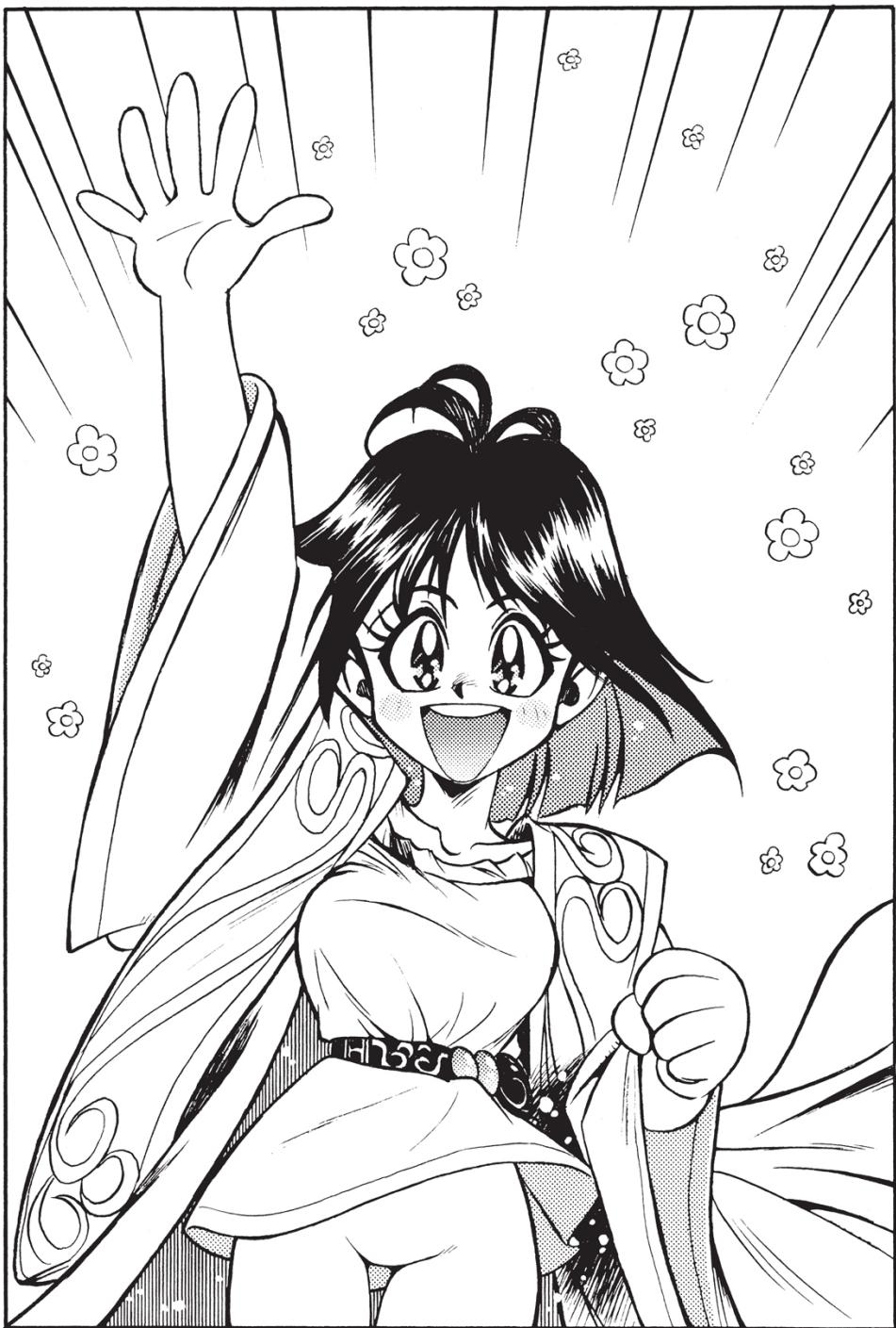
Suddenly, he stopped in his tracks. He'd seen someone coming out of the temple up ahead. It was a shrine maiden.

"Heya, Dad!" she called, a little casually for a heartwarming reunion.

But Gourry and I were stopped in our tracks. Let me be quite clear: this girl was freakin' adorable.

She was maybe my age, with silky, black hair cut right above her shoulders. She had a baby face with big, round eyes. Her shrine maiden vestments were on the big side for

her, but that just added to her childlike charm.



Needless to say, she looked nothing like Sir Phil.

"Oh, Amelia! I'm so glad you're well!" he said, hailing her.

"Course I am! I just knew you were okay too, Dad!" she replied as she threw her arms around her father.

"Hey now, weren't you worried at all?"

"Aw, maybe a little. But I know that justice always prevails!" she proclaimed like a revolutionary, throwing her arms out wide. She then cast a glance my way. "So, who're these people?"

"Oh! This is Lina, and this is Gourry. They're my allies."

Vague, but okay. That was exactly the kind of thing I'd come to expect from this guy...

Sir Phil then turned to us with a light shrug and said, "This is my second daughter, Amelia."

"Second daughter?" I found myself asking dubiously.

"Yes. I have an older daughter named Gracia, but she's currently on a sojourn and hasn't yet returned."

"Knowing her, she's probably lost," Amelia said with a grin.

Gosh, how are these people so chill right now?

Sir Phil ruffled Lady Amelia's hair and said affectionately, "I know that all fathers think their daughters are, but you're truly beautiful. Just like your father."

"Not at *all* like her father..." Gourry and I muttered in unison.

"Nice ta meetcha!" she said, waving to us cheerfully.

Seriously, where in the hell's that energy coming from?

"L-Likewise..."

"The pleasure is all ours..."

Once we'd finished up the pleasantries, the girl looked around.

"Uncle is here," she then said in a meaningful tone.

I looked around too and saw three familiar figures headed our way from the temple entrance. I'm sure I don't need to spell it out, but it was Christopher, his son Alfred, and the sorcerer Kanzel.

"Are you well, Brother?" Christopher asked.

"Yes," Sir Phil replied with a pained expression.

"Where have you been? I was terribly worried,"

Christopher continued, playing dumb.

Sir Phil knew that he was the one behind all this, and Chris knew that Phil knew. This whole charade was a mockery on Chris's part.

"And who might these two companions of yours be?"

He probably already knew that, too. We'd kept our faces covered last night, but now Phil was showing up with two mysterious companions... With a little insight and imagination, it wasn't hard to make the connection. Yet, to everyone's surprise, it was Lady Amelia who spoke up for us.

"These two? They're *old friends* of my dad's."

Even Christopher seemed daunted by this. It was a bald-faced lie, but one he'd used himself. He couldn't exactly object.

"I... I see," he managed to choke out.

"Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabiev," Sir Phil introduced.

"Oh, *the* Lina Inverse?" the sorcerer Kanzel piped up with interest. He must've heard the many rumors about me...

"Remember your place, Kanzel," Christopher scolded.

"Beg pardon," he immediately replied, bowing deeply. There was almost something condescending about it.

"Allow me to make the rest of the introductions, then," Lady Amelia said, turning my way. "This is my *beloved* uncle, Christopher."

Christopher's expression turned sour upon hearing this.

"This is my cousin, Alfred," Lady Amelia continued. "And this is my uncle's *old friend*, Master Kanzel. All this trouble just *happened* to start *right after* he came to us. We all feel *so bad* about the inconvenience."

Wow, she... was really putting on the thumbscrews, spelling it all out like that with the soldiers standing right freakin' there. It seemed they already knew what was afoot, however, as several of them openly looked uncomfortable

and several more were giving Christopher the old stinkeye.

"Why, it's such a pleasure to meet you," I said, playing along with the charade and grinning at the three men.

It would've taken impressive nerve to let a bombardment like that roll off your back, and Christopher wasn't up to the task. He was visibly sweating.

"I'm glad to see you well, Brother, but I have business to attend to," he announced as he turned away.

But Sir Phil wasn't gonna let him off that easy.

"Wait, Chris!"

Twitch! A shudder ran through his body, and he begrudgingly looked back over his shoulder.

"Yes?"

"Release Clophel."

"We can't do that, I'm afraid," Christopher said, recovering his smirk. "It seems he was in contact with the intruders who stole into the palace last night. We now believe him to be involved with the recent assassinations."

"Don't be absurd. Those were my investigators."

"Inve—" Sir Phil said it so plainly that Christopher was briefly struck dumb. He probably hadn't expected him to cop to it like that. (Honestly, I hadn't either.) "Investigators? What... What do you mean?"

"I can't reveal that," Sir Phil declared with a sly grin of his own.

Chris said not a word more. Any further speculation on his part would just cast suspicion back on himself.

"I had my investigators deliver a message to Cloph last night. On their way out, they ran into another suspicious party on the lawn who nearly hit them with a blaze of fire. Perhaps *they* were the true assassins?"

Chris was still silent.

"Well, you heard me. Release Cloph at once," Sir Phil reiterated.

"...B-But..."

"Is there more to be said?"

"Is that... true?"

"I have no need to lie to protect Cloph. Unless you think I'm the one behind the assassinations... Is that it?"

"C-Certainly not!" Christopher denied swiftly.

"Then you have no cause for complaint. Let's go."

"Oh, I'll help! I can handle the paperwork!" Amelia volunteered.

Sir Phil then turned to us and said, "I have some rather dry affairs to attend to. I imagine they'd only bore you, so why not do some sightseeing around the palace instead?"

Really, dude? You wanna just go off without us? Granted, he was surrounded by soldiers now, and it was unlikely Chris would try anything in broad daylight. It seemed he had less pull around here than I initially thought.

"Now, I'll need someone to show you around. Let's see..." Sir Phil mused, looking around for a candidate.

"I'll do it, if I may," said Kanzel, stepping forward.

We were all temporarily at a loss for words. Unlike Christopher, this man had some real cunning.

"Oh, sure! That would be lovely," I said with a bright smile.

The real fun was just getting started.

We climbed a low staircase made of white augite, passed through a set of grand doors, and found ourselves in a large, vaulted room. Colorful stained glass depicted the story of the kingdom's founding. Exquisite ornamentation, neither too gaudy nor too plain, made the space feel majestic without being overwhelming. A single band of red carpet led us from the door to the altar.

"This is a temple to Flare Dragon Ceifeed. I'm told they hold coronations here as well," Kanzel explained, sounding entirely disinterested. "There are dormitories on either side of the building. The shrine maidens are housed to the left, and the little priests to the right. We have no reason to visit either place."

“Little priests,” huh? You’ve really got some nerve, buddy...

The three of us—me, Gourry, and Kanzel—proceeded further into the temple.

“Ahead of us are the entrances to the residences I told you about. And beyond that you’ll find the breezeway that leads to the main palace,” Kanzel continued.

He was briskly walking along, giving us the quick and dirty on the place. His explanations were so rushed and cursory that we didn’t have room to ask questions, much less time to stop and look at anything.

When he nominated himself for this job, I was prepared for a confrontation... but he was keeping his hostility in check for now. I was a little disappointed, actually. Here I was, looking forward to some “I’m so strong, you should run away while you still can” puffery en route to some good old-fashioned sniping...

Or was this guy just waiting for us to bring the subject up first? While I thought that over, we entered the breezeway that connected to the palace proper.

The weather today was incredibly nice. The sky was bright blue, and the sun was pleasantly warm... If not for all the drama going on around us, it would’ve been a great day to stretch out on the grass. But as I was taking in scenery, I realized that Kanzel was now walking fast enough to leave me behind.

I snapped out of my reverie and picked up the pace, but... How strange. No matter how fast I walked, I couldn’t seem to catch up to Gourry and Kanzel. In fact, they only seemed to get farther and farther away. Their figures pulled away from me, getting smaller and smaller until they looked like ants... then disappeared altogether.

I was under the enemy’s spell.

2: Why Are They After Me?! What Did I Do?

I turned back, but all I could see both before me and behind me was an empty corridor. No sign at all of the temple we'd come from or the palace where we were headed. Space had warped... At least, so it seemed.

But was that possible? Summoning magic worked by altering spatial relationships to transport a distant creature to the caster's location, so it should theoretically be doable... Either way, I'd have to run a few tests.

There was no wall or railing on either side of the breezeway. The ceiling was held up by evenly-spaced marble pillars, beyond which lay the green grass of the lawn. I decided to try moving into the courtyard to see what would happen. I was hoping the corridor wouldn't disappear entirely and dump me out into the middle of an empty field, but...

"Here goes nothing," I said to no one in particular.

With that, I stepped out onto the lawn... A feeling like vertigo washed over me, then I found myself right back in the middle of the corridor.

"...Ah. Thought so."

What's the next step, then? There's probably nothing extraordinary about the original architecture, so...

As I organized my thoughts, I began to hear heavy footsteps approaching from a good distance down the corridor. Yes, of course... Whoever had so kindly brought me here surely meant for me to face off with whatever was thundering this way.

I couldn't see what it was yet, but given that it sounded

like a galloping herd of horses, it was pretty clear they weren't coming for a nice chat over tea. Apologies to my "host," but I was gonna bow out if I could.

The question, then, was... *could* I? I began chanting a basic summoning-type spell. It was meant for gargoyles, but by altering the incantation a little, you could call all kinds of things. A person could alter spells in all kinds of ways if they really understood the incantation's structure and meaning.

The heavy footsteps drew nearer as I chanted... I unleashed my spell as soon as I finished it. A small, white bird appeared before my eyes and flapped its wings, flying up into the blue sky outside the corridor.

"Hey, a dove," Gourry remarked.

I was suddenly back in the original breezeway with Gourry and Kanzel just a bit ahead of me.

"Looks like it worked," I said, hastily running to join them.

"What did?" Gourry asked.

"Nothing," I responded.

I can tell you what really happened, but bear with me, because it's a little hard to explain. By summoning a completely normal dove, I brought temporal reality into contact with the illusory world where I'd been stranded. And lo and behold, the stability of reality—in other words, its ability to assert itself over distorted versions of itself—won out in the fight for dominance.

At least, I think that's what happened. In simpler terms, the spell was unstable and popped like a bubble when I connected it to the real world.

"That was *very* impressive, Master Kanzel," I said in a discordantly chipper tone.

"What are you talking about?" he asked impassively. And thus began our stay at the royal palace.

I lay restlessly on the bed, listening to the sounds of insects on the night wind. I'd been given accommodations not far from Sir Phil's personal quarters, and Gourry was

staying in the guest room right next to mine. If anything happened to Sir Phil, we'd be the first to know and could respond right away.

Officially, though, that was the royal guards' job. We were Sir Phil's hired bodyguards and all, but even if only for appearances' sake, we were still guests at the palace. At night, the guards ran security and I should theoretically be able to relax and get a proper night's sleep, but...

For some reason, despite the exhaustion of the day, the sandman just wasn't coming. My bed was perfectly comfortable, however, which meant it was my usual instinct for trouble flaring up. Would there be a night raid? Most likely...

While casually dreaming of danger, I gazed over the sliver of moonlight coming in from between the blinds. Then I quietly bolted upright. Something was blocking the moonlight, and it wasn't a cloud. No, someone was standing outside my window—my *veranda-less, third-story* window.

The next moment, two things happened simultaneously: I grabbed my sword and flew out of bed, and a blade tore through the window slit, splitting the bar holding it closed. *Whoosh!* The window blew wide open and the night air rushed in. A figure hovered just outside in midair, like a swath of black against the starry sky beyond.

"Wrong room, maybe?" I muttered to myself while formulating a plan in my head.

The assassin slipped through the window and soundlessly planted his feet on the floor. Everything except his eyes was cloaked in black, preventing me from reading his expression. I could barely sense his presence, either. He had to be pretty skilled...

"Sneaking into a woman's room in the middle of the night... You should at least introduce yourself first, you know?" I snarked.

"Zuma," he replied readily.

I was a little surprised. It left me at something of a loss as

for how to respond at first.

"Wouldja look at that... he actually gave his name. Such a polite assassin!"

"I always give my name. To my employers... and to my soon-to-be victims."

He followed up his threat with a dash into action. I had a wall directly behind me and a nightstand immediately to my left. This guy probably already knew my only path of escape was to the right, and I didn't have time to finish hashing out a proper plan. My only recourse was jumping into my bed like a diver into water. I then quickly righted myself and began speed-chanting a spell. The moment Zuma saw me move, he flipped through the air, kicked off the wall, and sailed toward me.

I managed to dodge him, but I realized in the process that he was chanting too. Based on the meter, it didn't sound like an attack spell... I'd have the upper hand in a spellcasting shootout, but this guy was clearly my better in close-quarters combat.

He slipped past a slash from my shortsword and moved in on me unarmed. Loathe as I am to admit it, if he'd had a blade in his hand—or if I *hadn't*—that would've been the end of me.

There was only the pale moonlight from the window to illuminate the room, and it was hard to get any distance from my would-be assassin. I figured I'd nail him with the attack spell I was chanting, and if that didn't drop him, I'd hit him with a Lighting. I'd get something to see by and maybe fry the guy's retinas in a two-for-one special.

But first came a pounding at the door...

"Lina! What's wrong?"

"Gourry!"

He must have realized something was wrong and come running. Too bad I'd locked the door from the inside. It was a personal habit—one that might cost me my life this time. I didn't exactly have a free moment to walk over and unlock

it. I'd just have to hold out until Gourry broke the door down and came to my rescue.

"Bram Blazer!"

I fired a blast of light, which Zuma easily dodged before it flew out the window and disappeared into the night.

"Dark Mist..." he then murmured.

Instantly—*Fssst!*—darkness consumed us.

"What?!" I shouted in panic.

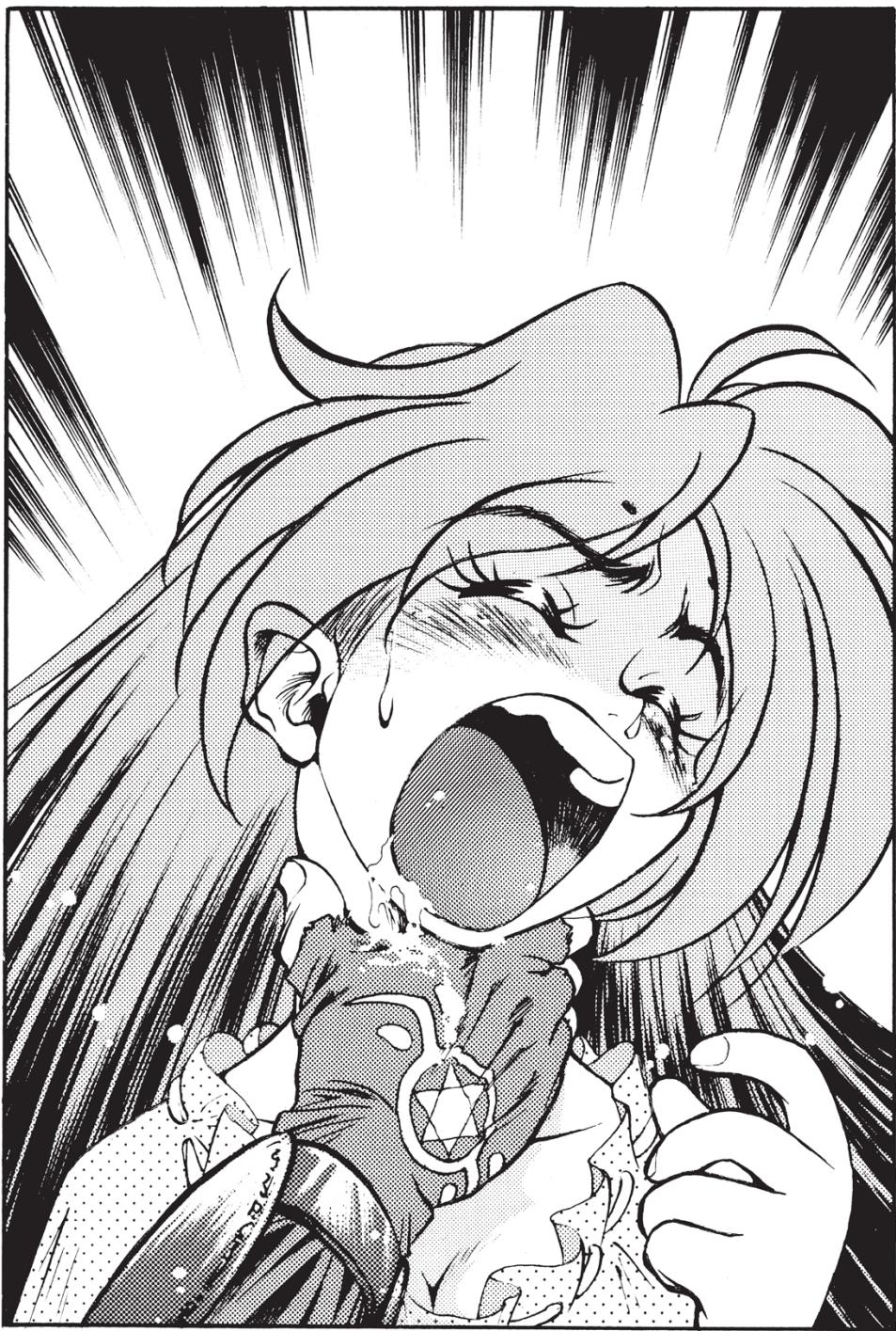
All light had vanished from the room. I couldn't see a thing. Still, I knew that I was better off not standing in place. I started moving and chanting.

"Lighting!"

I felt the spell spring from my outstretched palm... but that was it. No flash, no nothing. It seemed Zuma's spell hadn't just concealed the light in the room, but actually produced a thick, black mist—perhaps even darkness itself.

I couldn't see or sense Zuma anywhere. He hadn't withdrawn, though; he was probably just hiding. I was betting he couldn't see me either under the circumstances... but he'd undoubtedly have an easier time sensing me than the other way around.

Suddenly, I felt a cold sensation run up my back. On instinct alone, I drew back and swung my sword. A hand seized my throat...



Crack! There was a wet sound, a shot of agony, and a wheeze from my throat. I then heard the door give way.

“Lina!” Gourry called. “Wh-What the—”

The pitch-black room had given him a moment’s pause, but he must have sensed my presence, because he was at my side in a flash, grabbing my arm.

“You okay, Lina?”

I said nothing. I just buried my face in his chest.

“Hey, it’s okay now. I think he ran away, so... Hey, Lina, you really okay?”

I couldn’t answer him. The pain from Zuma crushing my windpipe was finally catching up with me.

“Testing. One, two, three. Testing... Hello, hello there. I’m Lina Inverse.”

What? Don’t look at me like that. I haven’t lost my mind or anything. I was just making sure my voice was working.

After Zuma took off, Gourry reported the incident to one of the night watchmen, then escorted me to a magical doctor in the temple. The guy was a real trooper about being woken up at an ungodly hour for work, and he also did a great job fixing my throat. We thanked him and took our leave afterward.

“But... why’d an assassin come after you in the first place?” Gourry muttered as we walked the breezeway from the temple back to the palace.

“I wish I knew. You’d think they’d be after Sir Phil. I doubt it was a simple case of ‘wrong room,’ though...”

“Do you think it’s maybe... you know?”

“What?”

“A ‘birds of a feather’ kind of situation?”

“Yeah, sure. Maybe.”

“You know... when you blow off my teasing, it’s kind of a letdown.”

I blew that off too and continued: “It was probably meant to be a diversion of some kind. He could attack me, raise a ruckus, bring all the guards running... And then the real

force could pounce on Sir Phil. Seems like the guards saw through it since none of them left their posts.”

“Hmm... I dunno,” Gourry said, looking skeptical.

“What?”

“When you were being attacked, I didn’t sense anyone else in the area.”

I hummed to myself thoughtfully. Gourry’s night-animalistic ability to sense other people’s presences had never led us astray. If he said it wasn’t a diversion, I had no choice but to believe him.

Looking ahead to the palace from the corridor, we could see that security was just as tight as it had been the night we’d first sneaked in. In order to infiltrate my room, Zuma would have had to take out a few of the night watchmen without the others noticing. But the question still remained... Why?

“Morning...” I called, waving lightly to Lord Clophel and Lady Amelia as they enjoyed their tea on the lawn.

I was ridiculously sleepy. After the attack last night, I’d gotten to wondering... if the enemy wasn’t really after me, was there something in my room they wanted? Gourry and I had thus stayed up until dawn scouring the place, but the joke was on us. We didn’t find squat.

In retrospect, that room I was staying in had been vacant until I arrived yesterday. Surely if someone was using it for something, they would’ve cleaned up before I settled in.

“Morning, Mistress Lina! Sounds like you had a rough night!” Lady Amelia waved as she gulped down her tea.

Apparently she’d heard the news already. She was friendly and cheerful almost to a fault, but she sure was on the ball when it counted.

“Come, come join us! Have a seat,” she beckoned. I obliged and took the chair across from her as Lord Clophel served me. “Is Master Gourry with my dad?”

“Yeah,” I responded, taking a sip of exceptionally sweet

tea.

Gourry was doing the bodyguard thing, but I wasn't just slacking off myself. I'd avoided assassination once, but I knew things wouldn't be over until I cut the problem off at the source. I could always just hold my horses until the next attack, then catch my would-be assassin and make him talk... but I wasn't really one to play the waiting game.

Instead, I'd decided to go around asking questions in the open. That should put pressure on the enemy, and maybe even net me some useful intel. There was also the possibility that it might paint a giant target on my back, but if it came to that, I could always fall back on the capture-and-question plan with whoever dared to come at me next. Granted, it'd be a little tricky if it turned out to be that Zuma guy again...

Nevertheless, protecting Sir Phil was still our first priority. Gourry and I couldn't both leave him to go around scouting information, which was why I'd left guard duty to the blond lug while I got to work.

"I am curious what's really going on here," Lady Amelia mused as she dumped more sugar into her teacup after Lord Clophel refilled it for her. "The attack on your room last night came up at breakfast, and Uncle Christopher looked pretty shaken."

"Chris— Sir Christopher did? Really?" I found myself scowling. If he was the one pulling the strings, why would he be surprised to hear I was attacked? "You don't think he was just faking it?"

"Nah. I know a performance when I see one, and this was no act. He stopped eating and stormed off and everything."

"I see..." I replied, taking another sip of tea.

Was last night the handiwork of one of Christopher's subordinates (most likely Kanzel) acting out of turn, then? If the enemy's chain of command was breaking down, this could be a ripe opportunity for us. Christopher's son was worth investigating too. I still wasn't sure where he stood in all of this, but I had to wonder if I could get some

information out of him.

"So, Lady Amelia, can you tell me about your cousin Alfred?"

"You want to know about Alfred?" she asked with an impish grin. "Why don't you just ask him yourself?"

"Indeed. I'd be happy to answer any of your questions," spoke a voice from behind me.

I turned around in surprise to find Alfred standing right there. When had he shown up?

"May I join you?" he asked, even as he took the seat to my left. He then brushed his hair back in a theatrical fashion as he turned to me. "Now, what is it, my dear? What did you want to know about me?"

I had to say, it felt like a lie. And okay, maybe five out of ten women on the street would fall for a pass from a guy like this, but my evaluation of his type was simple: chronically self-obsessed. Male or female, I was never a fan. It'd be one thing in a superficial relationship or if matters around the castle weren't so grim... But whenever there's trouble, his type tend to see themselves as the lead of some tragedy and blame things on "cruel fate" rather than engage in meaningful self-reflection about how they got there.

Such people quickly became despots when given authority. Granted, with a little indulgence, they were also easy to manipulate...

"I was hoping I might ask your take on the situation," I inquired politely.

"You're a direct little thing, aren't you?" He looked around casually, a wry smile on his lips. "To be honest, I'm not a fan of what's been going on, even though it is my own father's doing..."

Whoa, dude! Are you sure you should just be blurting that out?! It was such a shocking statement that Lord Clophel and I both looked around in a panic. It seemed we were the only ones who'd heard it, but still...

"Anyone with any common sense at all knows that. What

of it?" Lady Amelia asked, smoothly moving things along.

"I'm hardly the type to make excuses, but I've tried to talk my father out of this nonsense numerous times. But no matter what I say, he insists it's 'for the nation!' He may truly be thinking of the kingdom in his own way, but... I simply don't approve of his methods. Of course, I can't exactly denounce my own father... Amelia!" Alfred exclaimed, suddenly seizing her hands. "I need to ask you the favor of a lifetime! Please... Can you arrange for Uncle Phil and my father to talk things out? I'm sure if they could have a heart-to-heart without any interference, my father would see the light!"

Alfred stared earnestly into her eyes. It didn't seem like an act, but I couldn't be sure...

Well? What's your take, Lady Amelia?

"Let me think..." she said after a long pause. "Okay. I'll talk to my dad."

"Oh, thank you, Amelia!" He stood up and embraced her gently. "I'll propose the idea to my father at once!"

With that, he ran straight back to the palace. Silence hung over the tea table for a while.

"So, what do you think that was all about, Lady Amelia?" I finally asked.

"I don't exactly know," she answered with a vague smile. "At the very least, it means something's about to happen."

That was a rather detached statement...

"But still," she said, her expression unchanged. "I really hate not being able to trust my own family."

She said those words lightly, but... I felt sure I saw a terrible sadness in her eyes.

"Ahh, I'm exhausted," I said as I flopped onto the bed.

"Hey, Lina, no sleeping yet."

"I know."

I sat up again and dangled my legs off the side, facing Gourry as he sat on the nightstand. We were in my room for

a strategy meeting. A refreshing bath, a filling dinner, and a long night's sleep would be so awesome right now... but that would all have to wait until I touched base with Gourry.

"You do seem pretty worn out though, Lina."

"Guess I am. It's hard to relax around all these stuffed shirts."

"Interesting," Gourry hummed with a knowing nod.

"Usually you play by your own rules, no matter who you're dealing with."

"You got a problem with that?"

"Several."

"Too bad."

That shut him up.

"Look, we're in the royal palace here. You have to watch everything you do around these bigwigs. As long as I'm dealing with normal people, I can carry on however I like—no harm done. But if I behaved like that here, they'd throw me right out on my ear."

"Even when it comes to dealing with 'normal people,' that 'no harm done' assertion doesn't really hold water..."

"Sure it does. Anyhoo, you got anything to report?"

"Nope," Gourry said with a shake of his head.

"Okay, anything grab your attention? New rumors, et cetera?"

"Nothing," he said, still shaking his head.

Well... it's not like I had my hopes up. I let out a long sigh.

"Well, something interesting *did* happen on my end..." I gave Gourry the rundown on Amelia and Alfred's little exchange this morning. "What do you make of that, Gourry?"

"In what sense?"

"You know! Is it a trap?"

"Could it *not* be a trap?"

Shame on me for asking.

"A-Anyway, Gourry... I'm thinking that even if it is a trap, we should help facilitate this supposed 'talk.' It should move

things along, if nothing else.”

“You’re saying we should stand back and just let the cards fall as they may?”

Well, yes, but... there were better ways to phrase it. Why’d he have to be so indelicate?

The next day, it was the same old security, same old routine—on the surface, at least. Underneath, things were astir.

“Looks like they reached an agreement.”

We were currently in the middle of having lunch in the guest dining hall, meaning it was just me, Gourry, and our server. The royal family was dining together privately (sans the bedridden king, most likely), as was apparently their tradition outside of grand balls and such. Just imagining the tense atmosphere over that table made me shudder. I’d heard a server even passed out from anxiety once.

Anyway, back to me and Gourry...

Gourry finished chewing and swallowing his food, then said, “Agreement? About what?”

Plop! I unwittingly dropped my spoon into my stew bowl.

“You... are really something else,” I said in a low voice to keep the server from hearing as I tried to restrain my trembling. “Did you already forget about yesterday? I’m saying they reached an agreement to talk!”

“Oh, that,” Gourry said casually. “Why didn’t you just say so? Then I would’ve remembered immediately...”

So he really *had* forgotten...

“They haven’t set a date and time yet, but it seems like it’ll be soon,” I added before returning my attention to my meal.

The spoon I’d dropped had vanished into my soup without a trace. “Darn it...” I grumbled, trying to fish around with my fork. *Aha!* Just as I thought I’d found it...

Bloosh! The stew erupted out of the dish. No, wait...

“Graaaaah!”

Gourry and I both reeled back. It wasn't actually the stew that burst out of the bowl, but dozens of long, sticky, stew-colored tentacles!

"L-L-Lina! This isn't funny!" Gourry shouted.

"I'm not the one doing it!" I shouted right back.

In the meantime, one of the skinny tentacles had stuck itself to the table and was now straining, apparently trying to pull whatever it was attached to out of the bowl. And beside it, a roast chicken had split down the middle as a pair of hands reached up from out of it.

"Is this what you guys serve around here?! I wanna talk to the chef!" I declared, but when I turned back to the server... I saw he'd slumped weakly to the ground and turned into salt. No discipline at all!

I had bigger things to worry about than the staff, though! The tentacles' main body had now appeared and planted itself on the table. It was a bouncy round sphere about the size of my arm span with a few dozen long, stringy tentacles sprouting from it. It was honestly a little silly-looking, but I was in no state to appreciate that in the moment.

The thing coming out of the roast chicken was also now halfway emerged. It looked like a big clump of seaweed in the shape of a human, with childlike proportions.

"What do we do?" Gourry asked.

"What do you think? We run!" I answered.

I then rushed to open the nearer of the two doors... But as I looked through it, I fell silent in shock.

"What is it, Li—" Gourry called, rushing to my side before falling similarly silent.

For beyond the door was a room just like this one. There was a table lined with food, complete with two bizarre monsters... And in the far back of the room stood an open door flanked by two familiar figures staring dumbly into it.

That's right. It was us.

"Gourry, behind you!"

"What?!" he exclaimed, whipping around so that the

“other” Gourry was now facing me.

“Hi!” I said, waving to him.

“Quit playing around!” my Gourry shouted, slamming the door shut. “What’s going on here?!”

“An infinity mirror.”

“What are you talking about?!”

“It’s a phenomenon... Looks like we have no choice but to fight Mr. Roly-Poly over there—somehow or other!”

I began chanting a spell. Gourry drew his sword from his belt and sliced at the squiggly tentacle-sphere. *Bwom!* With a rather silly noise, the blade passed through its body.

“What?!”

The momentum of his attack carried the surprised Gourry stumbling past the blob. It then fired some kind of black clump at him from... somewhere, not sure where.

“Move!” I screamed, but he’d already dodged it.

The black lump hit the floor with an underwhelming sploosh, and while I was curious what it might have done if it had made contact with flesh, I was in no mood to find out. I’d had to call off my chant to warn Gourry, but the spell I’d been working on was a Flare Arrow—the efficacy of which I now doubted against our strange little opponents.

To make matters worse, a third creature had just crawled out of the stew bowl.

“Gourry! The light!” I called.

“Right!” he called back, sheathing his sword.

This wasn’t a misunderstanding on his part. He purposefully drew a pin from his pocket, released the blade of his sword from its hilt, and then cried...

“Light, come forth!”

With that, he drew the handle of his sword again—this time with a brilliant blade streaming from it. This was the legendary Sword of Light, capable of producing a demon-slaying blade made of sheer human will!

I could sense a jolt of tension seize the weird creatures (not sure what else to call them) when they saw the sword,

and they proceeded to fire a series of more black lumps at Gourry in a panic. He dodged through the barrage to slice through Seaweed Boy, who slumped over with a dull thud and began to evaporate before our eyes.

Obviously, I wasn't just gonna sit back and let Gourry steal the show. While Tentacle Ball, Seaweed Boy (now out of the picture), and the newly-arrived tomato-looking creature with lots of arms and tails were all focused on Gourry, I had been focused on the source of our troubles: the table. A fourth monstrosity—now half emerged from the roast chicken—fired a black lump at me but only caught my cape. Now it was my turn.

“Elemekia Lance!”

My spell hit the thing dead on, tearing open a large hole in its body. I thought as much... We were fighting creatures from the astral plane. The spell I'd just used was meant to do spiritual damage rather than physical, so the gaping hole in the creature suggested it was a being made of pure spirit. Which meant I just had to cut them off at the source!

The monstrosity I'd nailed with my Elemekia Lance had already disintegrated and disappeared. My stew bowl was eerily frothing, but I shattered it with the butt of my shortsword, then sliced the roast chicken in half on the backswing! Okay, not exactly a brag-worthy feat when I stopped to think about it...

I had to wonder for a minute what might have happened if an ordinary weapon hadn't worked on the bowl and chicken that were spawning the creatures, but luckily, it had. If nothing else, I'd effectively stopped more from appearing.

I cast a glance Gourry's way. He seemed to have destroyed Tentacle Ball, but was getting some real guff from Tomato-with-Tails.

“What are you doing?!”

“Be careful! This one's pretty tough!”

Ugh! I started a quick incantation. Only spells that dealt

direct spiritual damage—like black magic and astral magic—were effective against these little dudes. Not being able to use cantrips to keep them in check made this kind of a pain.

The creepy tomato used twisty, unsettling movements to dodge Gourry's sword strikes before suddenly firing one of its tails in my direction. *Vzz!* It burst apart mid-flight, sending countless black clumps flying at me. I immediately hit the deck and rolled behind the table, using it like a shield. *Little jerk...* I then popped out from cover and shot a spell at the creepy tomato while it was occupied with Gourry!

“Dark Claw!”

A blast of magic resembling a swarm of black winged insects zoomed at its back. (If the thing had one, that is!) But without any warning, it bent unceremoniously to the side... sending my spell streaking toward poor Gourry behind it!

“Waaah?!”

With a wail, he batted my spell away with the Sword of Light in just the nick of time. I wasn't sure if he'd meant to do it or if he just got lucky, but he sent my ball of magic speeding right into the tomato creature.

And with that, the fight was finally over.

“Whew! No one beats teamwork like ours!” I declared, holding my fingers up in a “V” for victory!

“Teamwork, shteamwork! You scared the hell out of me!”

“C'mon, now. All's well that ends well...”

“Still, though...” Gourry wearily slumped into his chair. “Those guys were exhausting...”

“Despite the goofy appearances, yeah,” I said, joining him at the table.

And just then...

“Excuse me... is there some kind of problem?”

Gourry and I jerked upright when we heard someone address us out of the blue. It was our server, who was looking at us worriedly. How long had he been there? We

were apparently back in our proper dimension now...

"Some kind of problem?!" Gourry huffed.

"Gourry," I stopped him. "That wasn't his fault. Besides, I don't think any time has passed here."

The room looked exactly as it had before all the trouble started, with our bowls of stew and roast chicken intact upon the table. The only evidence of the recent incident was my cape, where one of the black clumps had left a hole. It wasn't like acid corrosion. The threads of the cape itself were falling apart, turned brittle as though weathered.

Of course... so that's what they do. Dang, I just bought this cape, too...

Gourry was sitting there in stony silence while I was scowling and scrutinizing my cape... Our poor server just watched us, baffled and clueless as to what was going on. Thinking I should do something to dispel the awkwardness, I turned to Gourry and asked an extremely pertinent question.

"You want seconds on stew?"

"Absolutely not!" he said, all force.

That night...

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," Alfred said nervously, remaining on his feet.

We were presently in a stand-alone building some distance from the main palace. It was the size of a normal house, and all five of us were gathered there together: me, Gourry, Lady Amelia, Sir Phil, and Alfred. Sir Phil's guard detail was just outside the room, which was brightly lit by some kind of sphere hanging from the ceiling. It was probably a magic item that released a light similar to a Lighting spell.

"I'm sure you've already heard, but Master Gourry and Mistress Lina were attacked by some strange spell this afternoon," Alfred said, brushing his hair back anxiously.

"I have heard! Just what is Chris thinking?!" Sir Phil said,

arms folded.

"Actually, Uncle... I don't think my father was behind this."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's not like I could ask him outright, but he was unspeakably shocked when I informed him of what happened."

"I guess he would be..." I whispered.

"What do you mean?" Sir Phil asked.

"Well, I can't see what he'd stand to gain by ordering an attack on me and Gourry. If anything, it undermines his position. So unless this was some kind of misunderstanding of orders..."

"Then Kanzel's gone rogue," Alfred said, finishing my sentence for me. Pacing back and forth, he then continued, "When I told my father the news, he panicked and asked someone to summon Kanzel. That must have been why... Dammit! And with so much at stake! Is he trying to ruin everything?!"

For a dramatic end to his monologue, he pounded his fist on the wall. Lady Amelia picked up from there.

"Just who is Kanzel, anyway? He's so snooty. I've never liked him," she asked casually.

"I don't know. My father just brought him here one day out of the blue. All he told me was that he was an old friend... That's all I know," Alfred explained.

"It doesn't matter who he is so long as we can put an end to the conflict," said Sir Phil.

"True. But..." Gourry began.

"Even so..." Lady Amelia continued.

"That's not looking likely..." I concluded.

"Wh-What do you mean?" Alfred asked, panicking.

The presences of the guards stationed around the building, which I'd been keeping a corner of my attention on, had disappeared abruptly. The prickling sensation of hostile presences encroaching took their place.

"We've got assassins," I said simply.

"Assassins?!" Alfred exclaimed, nearly dumbfounded.

"You... You can't be serious! I'm here with you! Why would he send assassins *now*!?"

"Dunno. Just gotta deal with 'em for the time being," I said bluntly as I tried to feel out our enemy.

There were multiple presences, all of which were fairly strong. Sir Phil had had five guards outside, after all—and they'd all been taken out without so much as a peep. If Zuma was among this group, we might be in real trouble.

If some guards from the palace noticed something was amiss and came to investigate, that might be enough to send him running, but... The room we were currently in was basically designed for secret talks. It had no windows and only one door. There were louvers near the ceiling, but they weren't wide enough for a person to fit through.

Still, we couldn't just stay holed up in here. A Fireball tossed through the louvers would roast us all alive on the spot. The only proper way out of the room was the door, but our attackers were undoubtedly lying in wait for us there.

"We'll just have to fight our way through," Gourry declared.

"Hang on, man. First, barricade the door from the inside with the table," I said, picturing the layout of the building in my head.

"You want a barricade? We'll be trapped in here like rats!"

"Just do it! Lady Amelia, the courtyard is this way, right?" I asked, knocking on the wall opposite the door.

"It is," she responded with impressive calm. It seemed she had her father's presence of mind in times of crisis.

"I'm gonna break through," I said simply and began chanting a spell.

While I did that, Gourry and Sir Phil managed to move the eight-person table we'd been using up against the door. The door opened inward, so that should hold it shut. And they weren't done with their handiwork a moment too soon—the

door started to rattle just after the table was in place. I then pressed my hands against the far wall and unleashed the spell I'd been working on.

"Blast Wave!"

Ker-pow! With an ear-splitting explosion, part of the wall caved in, leaving a hole big enough for a person to walk through. Blast Wave really packed a destructive punch; the catch was that you could only use it against something you touched with both hands.

The night-cloaked courtyard opened up beyond the drifting dust cloud. The palace was in the other direction, but the guards should have heard a blast like that loud and clear.

"This way!" I called out, coughing my way through the dust as I leaped out into the garden ahead of everyone. The instant I did, a flash of hostility came from above. "Tch!"

I moved into a dodge, and with a soft zinging sound, something impaled itself into the ground at my feet. It was a knife about the length of my palm that glistened blue in the light leaking out from the room—most likely coated in poison.

Gourry barreled out of the house behind me, snatched up the knife, rolled, and threw it back at its source. A black-clad figure on the roof dodged it easily, then leaped down at Gourry.

"Gotcha!" Gourry cried as he swung his sword at his incoming attacker...

But what should have been a killing blow caught nothing, for the assassin had stopped their descent midair!

Levitation?!

Still floating in the air, the assassin kicked at Gourry. The toe of their boot glinted with the silver of a hidden blade, but thankfully Gourry managed to dodge it.

"Flare Arrow!" I cried, firing the spell as soon as it was ready.

Levitation didn't allow for much maneuverability, so the

black-clad assassin should be a sitting duck. And as predicted, a few of the dozen arrows I launched hit the poor sucker head-on, sending them tumbling to earth. That was one down.

And as that was unfolding, the other three members of our party emerged from the house. I figured my fiery spell would be enough to signal the guards and bring them running, but we'd have to hold out until then. Just then—*Whom!*—there was a massive explosion at the door to the room and two figures came tumbling in. While rolling over the table, they each tossed two flashes of silver—four of them in total—all aimed right at Sir Phil!

“Look out!” I shouted.

The next second, something white flitted through the air. Three knives fell harmlessly to the ground; Lady Amelia had knocked them out of the air with her cape. The final knife was in Phil's hand—he'd grabbed it out of the air!

“Whaaaat?!” the assassins shouted incredulously.

I couldn't blame them, really. Any normal person would've just tried to dodge it.

“Fools!” Amelia cried thunderously as she pointed a finger at the assassins. “You've turned your backs on sacred law to do evil's bidding! But can your sullied blades truly slay the will of justice?! Come and find out if you dare!”

Sounds like someone's a fan of heroic sagas...

But as she struck a cool pose, her body rose weightlessly into the air. Sir Phil, who was standing next to her, had grabbed her by the collar and lifted her up like a kitten by the scruff of the neck.

“Out of the way, Amelia!”

He then tossed her to me and Gourry. She landed skillfully, still posing.

“Don't underestimate me!” she cried angrily as one of the assassins made a break for Sir Phil.

Gourry and I moved at once to intervene, but...

“What mighty fools!”

Before we could do a thing, Sir Phil slammed his fist into the charging assassin! *Crack!* The poor guy went flying and crashed right into an internal wall, which he slid down and collapsed onto the floor.



"I don't know what possesses you to engage in these petty schemes," Sir Phil pronounced, pointing at the assassin (now immobile, his neck bent at a strange angle) as he began his lecture. "But I implore you to reconsider! Have you no family who cares for you? Regardless of your purpose, however righteous you believe it to be... you must not do anything to debase yourself or bring sorrow to your loved ones! I don't believe in pointless fighting. If you repent your actions and leave here at once, I shall let you go in peace!"

There, the other assassin moved. But it wasn't toward Sir Phil. Instead, he walked over to the assassin on the floor and took his pulse. He then cast a glance our way, broke into a run, and disappeared through the door he'd broken down to get in.

"Chose to flee, eh?" Sir Phil said with a weighty sigh.

Then, at last, we could hear soldiers approaching.

"Guess we made it through another one," Gourry said, glancing at the assassin collapsed on the floor.

Just then, something occurred to me...

"Get down!" I shouted, and everyone instinctively ducked.

Bwooom! The body of the fallen assassin exploded into pieces.

"What happened?"

"Are you all right?"

With that, the soldiers finally arrived. It was about dang time... We all managed to pick ourselves up. Nobody was seriously hurt.

"Ah..." Sir Phil groaned with great emotion as he righted himself. "It seems my rebuke caused him such shame that he exploded... I wish they wouldn't take these things so hard."

Yeah, uh... I don't think that's what happened, actually...

See, I'd thought something was strange about the assassin checking his fallen comrade's pulse. The dude was

clearly, painfully, and obviously dead (to Sir Phil's apparent ignorance), so why bother? It dawned on me that it might be a ruse, meaning his real intention was to do something with the body. There was also the way they'd blown in the door. It just all kind of screamed "bomb." He must've been hoping one of us would try to check the body right away and get caught in the blast.

"Highness! What's going on here?" one of the soldiers asked Sir Phil.

"We were attacked by ruffians, but all is well," he explained, sending the guards into a flurry.

"Ruffians?!" one screeched.

"Teams one and two, remain here! Team three, search the building! Team four, the surrounding area! Find and capture the intruders at all cost! And you there, report this to the palace," ordered the captain I'd met the other night when we first infiltrated the palace.

I had a feeling they'd never find anything, though. The assassins were long gone by now.

"But..." I muttered as I watched the panicking soldiers. "That Zuma guy didn't show up this time."

"Yeah..." Gourry muttered in response.

"Why?!" Alfred shouted at excessive volume. "Why would he attack me too? Don't tell me... Don't tell me!"

Dude was turning paler by the minute.

"Was this the real purpose of the attack this afternoon?" he whispered, his face now as white as a sheet.

Ah!

"This'?" Sir Phil inquired.

But instead of answering, Alfred just said, "Dad... I'm going to ask Dad!" and ran off toward the palace.

"What's he on about?" Sir Phil then asked, turning to me.

"How should I know?" I responded, conspicuously glancing around.

I had a pretty good idea what Alfred was thinking, but I couldn't exactly say it in front of the soldiers. Catching the

meaning of my coy antics, Sir Phil nodded deeply.

"I see. Then let us go elsewhere."

"I think he *was* the one who ordered the attack on me and Gourry this afternoon," I explained.

Obviously, I was referring to Christopher. We still had no proof he was the one behind everything, but it was basically an open secret in the palace at this point.

Our group had now moved to Sir Phil's personal quarters in the main palace. There were guards posted outside the door, of course, so we had to keep our voices down. That kind of inconvenience was why we'd chosen the stand-alone building to have our secret little chat in the first place, but...

"What are you talking about?" Gourry asked this time.

"There was no point in attacking us over lunch. So, naturally, we were all left wondering what was going on. Lord Alfred approached his father about it, realized Kanzel had gone rogue, and then came to us..."

"I see. He wanted us all together," Lady Amelia said with a nod.

"Yup. To polish us all off at once. And the easiest way to ensure we'd all be in one place was under the auspices of a strategy meeting after a failed attack on me and Gourry."

"Hmm..." Sir Phil rumbled, arms folded. "Absurd! It's simply too malicious! Even if Chris did want to get us all in one place, to involve his own son and risk his life in the process? I can't abide this one minute longer!"

"Now, wait just a minute," I said, urging calm. "We don't know anything for sure yet."

"But what else could it be, Lina?"

"I don't really know... but there's one thing that doesn't add up."

"What is it?"

"If that was *really* what the enemy was after, he would've pulled out all the stops for that one attack. Yet this time, he held back. For instance, that assassin named Zuma who

attacked me that first night—”

“What?!” Lady Amelia shouted out. “Did... Did you just say Zuma?!”

“Yeah... What about it?”

“Was it really Zuma?!”

“Well, that’s what he called himself.”

“So he’s here?” she whispered, her face ghostly pale.

“You know him?” Sir Phil asked.

“Just by rumor, but I’ve heard he’s a magic-wielding assassin who’s the best in the business,” she explained. “If what they say is true and he really is the one who attacked you, that means you’re his first mark... to ever survive.”

Erk... I found myself stunned into silence. If Gourry hadn’t shown up when he did, I might’ve been Zuma’s latest victim.

I managed to regain my composure and said, “Well, whatever this Zuma guy’s deal is, the fact remains that he wasn’t in on tonight’s raid. The guys who attacked us today weren’t bad, but they were still pretty standard.”

“Then what’s going on here?” Sir Phil asked.

I shook my head slightly and answered, “I don’t know. Maybe the attack this afternoon really was Kanzel going rogue, and you-know-who simply decided to capitalize on that. It’s also a possibility he was in a hurry and couldn’t get in touch with Zuma in time. But the real question here, now that this has happened, is whether or not you should still have your parley as planned...”

“We will,” Sir Phil said bluntly. “Even with all this—no, because of all this—I need to hash things out with Chris. Man to man.”

And so, the day of the supposed “talk” arrived. A serious tension had hung over the palace that morning. Everyone knew about the conflict between Sir Phil and Christopher.

After the attack in the stand-alone building, Alfred had apparently put the squeeze on Christopher and Kanzel but never got anything out of them.

Needless to say, the reigning sovereign, King Eldran, wasn't just playing dead while all this went down. He'd entreated Christopher for the two of them to make up time and again, but the prince had remained elusive with his own father too. And as long as King Eldran had no hard proof of foul play, he couldn't formally punish Chris either. Apparently, the anxiety of the situation was only making the old king's condition worse...

That meant a lot was riding on this conference, which was being held in another standalone building. If Christopher genuinely had no intention of making peace with Sir Phil, today would be the day things really hit the fan.

Just after noon, the group left the palace. That meant Sir Phil and Christopher, obviously, but it also included me and Gourry, Lady Amelia, Alfred, and Mr. Suspicious himself, Kanzel. If only Zuma were with us, it would've been a real family reunion. Of course, we still couldn't rule out that he'd show his face at some point.

As we walked, Kanzel cast a glance my way with a cold smile.

"You see the way Kanzel's eyeing me?" I said, soft enough that only Gourry, who was walking beside me, could hear. "I think someone's in love..."

"Yeah, right," Gourry said with a wince. "Though you must be feeling confident if you're making jokes like that..."

"For now, yeah."

"What if that assassin guy shows up?"

"You take him."

"Go figure..."

Still, Kanzel's little "warped space" trick was pretty dangerous. The only ones directly involved in the talks would be Sir Phil and Christopher, meaning they'd enter the building alone while the royal guard and the rest of us waited outside. So what if Mr. Suspicious decided to pull a fast one on us and send Zuma inside or something? I'd have to keep an eye on him the whole time to make sure he didn't

cast any spells.

The warm sun danced on the green grass of the courtyard. I could only wonder what kind of mischief such a beautiful day would bring us.

We were about halfway to the negotiation house, when...

Nyeee! The very air around us seemed to scream.

"What's that?!" someone shouted.

Then, a shadow passed over the sun.

"It's overhead!" Gourry called out.

And sure enough, we all looked up to see... a giant black lump plummeting toward us!

"Whaaaaat?!"

We scattered like flies to get out of the way.

Vwooom! It hit the ground with a dull shaking of the earth. Then came another ear-splitting cry as the thing began moving its feelers around. *Nyeee!*

It was a giant bug... Or so I would have said, but by the time it gets to be the size of a small dragon, calling it a bug just doesn't feel right. This was a giant *something* that happened to resemble a bug.

It had the slick, black hide of a beetle and eight thick legs, four on each side. A pair of wings—large, though too small for it to fly—flanked its carapace, and its round body was dotted with shining ruby-colored half-spheres that resembled jeweled amulets.

The soldiers flew into a panic. None of them tried to run, however. Instead, they converged for an uncoordinated attack on the bug. There was no sense of real strategy here. They just hacked at it mindlessly.

Even with some proper leadership, however, I was seriously doubtful they'd be able to harm the thing. Their strikes were just bouncing helplessly off of its shell. One clever soldier actually tried digging his blade into its joints, but the bug ignored that as it continued to move its feelers around curiously.

Then suddenly, as though it had detected its real target,

the giant creature changed directions with an agility belied by its eight spindly legs. As for its target...

Yeah. That would be me.

3: The Saillune Family Squabble Explodes!

“Wha? Why me?!” I started to complain, when just then...

Vmm! The big bug’s attack came out of the blue. All I saw was a slight blur of its wings, and the next thing I knew, I was rolling head over heels across the lawn.

Guh... The tumble knocked the wind out of me. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of Kanzel. He was staring straight at me with that same cold smile on his face.

“Lina!” Gourry cried, making a sweep at the bug with his sword. His blade sunk deep into its leg before coming out the other side.

“Gyeee...” The insect twitched its feelers in annoyance, then swiped at Gourry—with the leg he thought he’d just cut off!

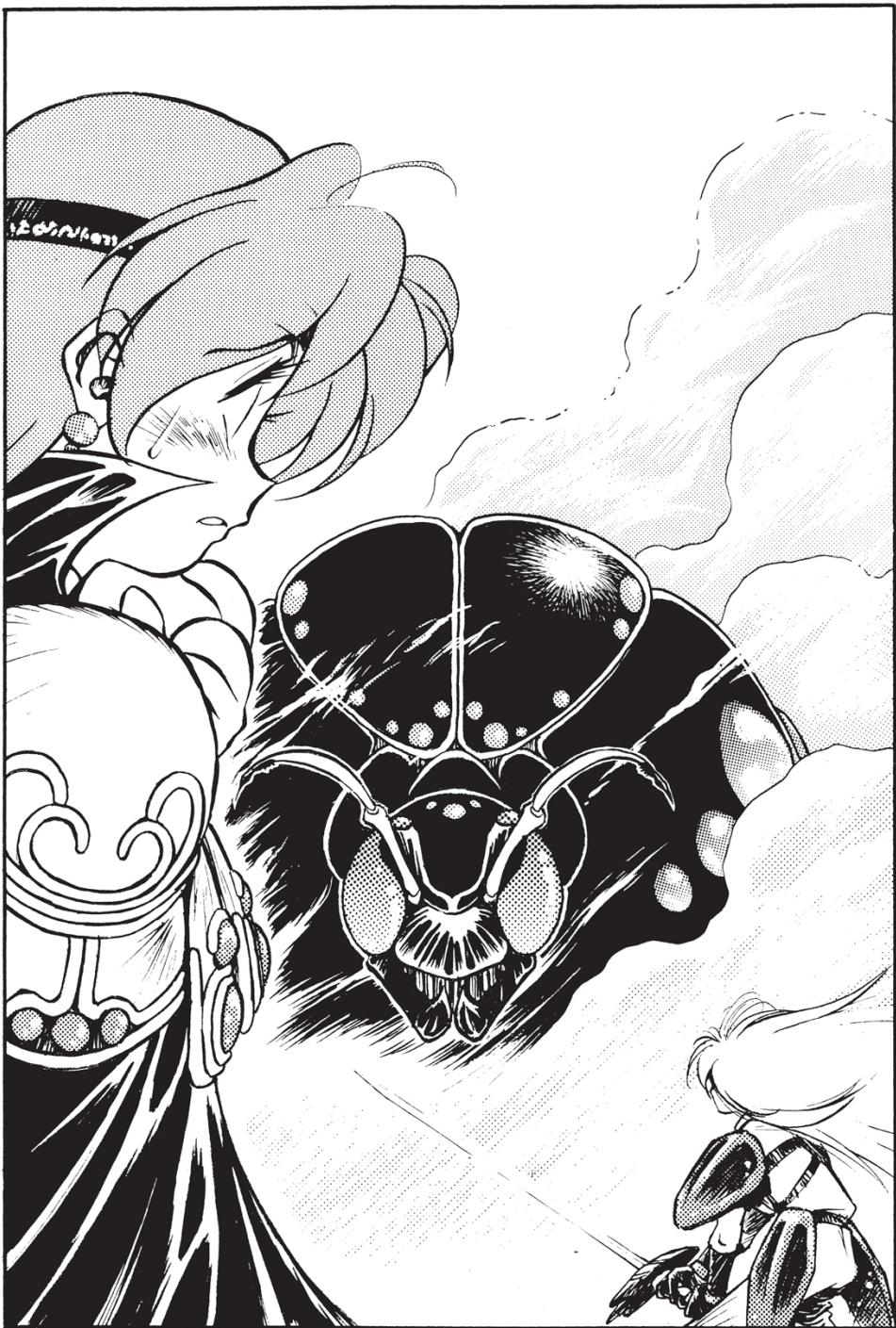
“What?!” Gourry exclaimed, leaping back in a panic.

Normal attacks clearly weren’t going to work on this thing. It was obviously some kind of magical beast, like Zanaffar in Sairaag... if probably not quite on that level.

I wasn’t about to miss the opening Gourry gave me, though! I was already back on my feet, finishing an incantation.

“Asher Dist!”

“Gyeee!” The bug trembled violently, releasing an air-shaking cry from its mouth.



But... that was all it did.

That spell would've turned even a vampire to powder, but it hadn't done any detectable damage to this "bug." It was tougher than I thought! Still, I had to admit summoning a magical beast like this was an impressive feat...

The bug turned its face toward me, opened its mouth wide, and... *Kyeee!*

When it cried out this time, I immediately leaped to the side. I then heard a huge explosion behind me. I glanced back to see part of the lawn unearthed with the dirt below exposed. It must've been another shockwave.

"Gourry! The light!" I cried as I started chanting again. With the soldiers still swarming all around the bug, I wouldn't be able to cast a major spell.

Nevertheless, as I began my incantation, the bug made a horizontal swipe toward my legs. I didn't bother trying to dodge because I thought I was well out of its range, but...

Crack! Regardless, I felt a hard impact against my legs, which sent me into a somersault and onto my back.

"Lina!" Gourry shrieked in alarm.

"What are you doing? Kanzel, this wasn't the deal!" Alfred screamed at the suspicious sorcerer some distance away...

Not that that was going to make the bug in front of me disappear. The tips of its feelers, pointed at me, began to glow with electric plasma.

No!

I struggled to right myself, but my legs were numb and sluggish. Lightning struck.

"Aaaaagh!" came a scream torn from my throat.

...

I must have blacked out for a second. When I next opened my eyes, all I could see was the bug's front leg, drawn back to strike. It was going to crush me! A tingle of fear ran up my spine.

Oh, the humiliation! Lina Inverse slain, squashed by a bug? It was too grim a fate to imagine, but I was powerless

to stop it!

Crack!

Just then, the incoming appendage disappeared—it was Lady Amelia! Whatever spell it was she'd cast had apparently blown the bug's leg clean off. The last thing I saw before my world went black was Gourry, Sword of Light in hand, leaping off the ground to slice at the insect's head.

"Let's drop this job," Gourry said to me. It was the first thing I heard upon waking up.

"Uh?" I looked around me, uncertain of where I was or what had happened.

We were in a rather large room with pristine white walls and ceiling. The air was thick with the smell of herbs. A number of magical doctors, sweat on their brows, were looking at me in great relief. Ah, this was the temple treatment center where Gourry had taken me back when Zuma crushed my windpipe.

"Huh...?"

Just sitting up took everything I had. It felt like there were weights strapped to my body. I was laid up in a bed at the center of a large six-pointed star.

"Hey! How ya feelin'?" Lady Amelia asked cheerily.

At her prompting, I tried moving around in various ways.

"I'm... exhausted, but nothing hurts and everything seems to be working. Something feels weird about my legs, though..."

"I'll bet! You'll get used to it soon."

"You'll *bet*? What exactly happened to me?"

"You're better off not asking," Gourry cut in.

Of course, when he put it that way, it only made me even more curious... I cast a glance Amelia's way.

She simply waved back at me with a grin and said, "Oh, don't worry. Seriously, no big deal. It just sliced your legs off and burned you extra-crispy—that's all."

Okay, so maybe I *shouldn't* have asked. But jeez, girl,

work on that bedside manner!

"So... can you give me the rest of the story?" I asked.

"That big bug thing got you, and Master Gourry just barely managed to take it out with the Sword of Light. I sure was surprised to see he had it, honestly..."

Yeah, I knew that much already...

"Lady Amelia," I tried asking again, "I meant after I lost consciousness—"

"Lina," Gourry interrupted. "We've done enough. Let's quit this job now."

"How come?"

"How come? *How come?*?! Someone's trying to kill you! If you stick your neck out any further, they're gonna take a swing at it for sure!"

"Yeah, I know."

"Then..."

"Listen, Gourry. That bug had a clear target in mind. Like you said, someone's trying to kill me. But *why*?"

"W-Well... I..."

"Don't know, do you?"

"No..."

"I don't either. These attacks on us seem inexplicable under the circumstances. The only way to make sense of them is if they're completely unrelated to the succession dispute. I think someone's after me first and foremost, and they're using the chaos as cover."

"Ooh..."

"Which means that quitting this job won't pull my feet out of the fire."

"I guess not..."

"So if walking away won't make me any safer, I might as well keep my word to Sir Phil, right?"

There, my blond companion fell silent.

"Listen, Gourry..."

"Hmm?"

"Thanks for worrying about me. But it'll be okay. I

promise."

"Still, don't you dare let your guard down. It's probably that Kanzel guy who's after you, and there's more to him than meets the eye."

"Hmm... speaking of Kanzel," I said while scratching my head. "I'm not so sure. I figured he was our likeliest candidate... right up until Mr. Nastybug appeared. I was watching him the whole time, and I'm positive that he didn't chant a single spell."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying," I began while looking between Gourry and Amelia, "that someone else summoned that bug."

"Now, Lady Amelia, can I ask..." I began after letting my dramatic revelation really settle in, "Was anyone else in the meeting entourage capable of using magic?"

"Let's see. Aside from the guards, you, and Master Gourry... Well, Master Kanzel goes without saying, but there's also Uncle Christopher, Alfred, and me. Basically everyone except for my dad."

"How skilled are they?"

"I don't really know. There aren't any strictures about what we can and can't learn, so we mainly just study whatever we think is neat. I happen to know most of the common cleric spells, plus a little bit of black and shamanistic magic. My sister Gracia really liked that sort of stuff, so I learned it with her."

"Hmm... One last question, then. I believe a man named Randy used to reside here at the palace. Were he and your uncle close?"

"Close enough, I guess. You knew Uncle Randionne?"

"Kind of," I answered vaguely.

My working theory at the moment was that Christopher summoned the bug. I'd been operating under the assumption that he had no reason to target me personally, but that wasn't necessarily true.

Remember how I mentioned I'd gotten involved in an incident with Sir Phil once before? Well, someone was trying to assassinate him at the time and it turned out to be his traveling companion, a guy named Randy who was third in line for the throne. Randy was killed during said incident, and while I wasn't the one who did the deed... What if Christopher thought I was?

"So, what happened with the talk?" I asked.

"It was called off, obviously. The atmosphere after the attack... wasn't exactly conducive, let's say."

"So other than us confirming that someone's after me, nothing's changed?"

"Oh, that's not true," Amelia said, still with a beaming smile. "Kanzel's gone missing now."

It was two days later that Lady Amelia brought us something significant. Gourry and I were in our umpteenth uneventful hour of standing outside of Sir Phil's office.

"Hey there!" she called with a wave.

"Hey there!" we replied, lightly returning the gesture.

Ever since we came to the conclusion I was being targeted, we'd decided that it was too dangerous for me and Gourry to split up. That meant we spent all our time with Sir Phil now... generally speaking, with very little to do. There hadn't been any more attacks (which, I mean, was a good thing!), but Lady Amelia's arrival was a welcome break to the otherwise uninterrupted monotony.

With a meaningful glance, she asked, "Could you guys come with me a minute?"

Gourry and I looked at each other. It had to be something serious—serious enough that she didn't want to say it in front of the other guards. Thus we followed her to a nearby room... presumably a guest room, as it looked exactly like the rooms where Gourry and I were staying.

"Something happened, right?" I asked.

"Hey, don't look so worried. It's nothing too serious," she

said with a smile as she retrieved a piece of paper from her pocket. "Yesterday, Clo— I mean, Lord Clophel went into the city for an errand and kinda got himself kidnapped. Hahaha."

"What?!" Gourry and I exclaimed in unison.

"That sounds pretty serious to me," I grumbled.

"Yeah, same," he agreed.

"From a certain perspective, I guess so... Anyway, they sent me this today," she continued, revealing the piece of paper to us.

It was a letter addressed to Sir Phil. Your typical ransom note. "If you want Clophel back alive, come alone, et cetera, et cetera," complete with your standard array of stock threats. I mean, sure, I know originality's not what you really look for in a ransom note, but still...

"I bet they sent it to me because security's too tight on my dad. Knowing him, I'm sure he'll rush right out to handle things himself the moment I show it to him. It's not like I can just toss the note out, though. Which means I've got a favor to ask you guys."

"You want us to save Lord Clophel?"

"Bingo! But I probably can't keep this a secret from my dad any longer than, say, tomorrow morning. So you'll get it done by then, right? Okay, later!"

"W-Wait, Lady Amelia!" I called as she made to leave. "I'm n-not sure this is—"

"You won't do it?"

"We will, but—"

"Then what's the big deal?"

"It's just... I feel like this has to be a trap."

"Hahaha! Oh, Mistress Lina, *of course* it's a trap!" she said with an unconcerned wave.

"Well, I mean... they probably sent you that letter knowing you'd ask us to handle it. Which means they'll likely try to attack Sir Phil while we're out of the palace."

"Oh, yeah, could be," she said, still unfazed.

What the heck? Does she really understand what's going on here?

Her cavalier demeanor gave me a real case of the nerves, but Lady Amelia clearly had no time for such reservations.

"Don't you worry! I'm sure it'll work out," she proclaimed.

You're sure, huh?

"Look, if you guys split up, they'll probably come after you again, Mistress Lina. And we can't just abandon Lord Clophel! The meetup location isn't somewhere that we can easily surround with soldiers, which means it *has* to be you guys. I mean, if it were up to me, I'd be happy to go with and unleash some justice on these unspeakable villains, but we should also have a magic-user back here just in case. So, I know it's a pain in the rear, but I really need you guys on the job. Thanks!"

And with that, she was out the door and gone... leaving Gourry and me behind, staring dumbly at each other.

The city was bathed in fine evening mist, with the Lighting spells upon its lampposts casting the avenue in a hazy light.

We were currently walking through the fifteenth block in the furthest reaches of Saillune City. It was your stereotypical "sleazy downtown." Cheap, dingy apartments. Brothels and bars alight with raucous voices drifting on the wind. But—perhaps due to the chaos and the eerie fog—there was no one in sight around us.

Sneaking out of the palace had been a cinch. And once we saved Lord Clophel, we'd be able to just march back in through the front gate. The only question now was how powerful the enemy we were facing would be. If they had Zuma or one of those bugs on their side, things might get dicey.

According to the map Amelia had given us, the meetup spot was in the middle of a spider's web of weaving alleyways in a shady part of town. She was right about the

location, at least; it would've been impossible to reliably stage soldiers around a maze like this.

There were streetlamps here and there, but their faint light in the mist mainly made things creepier. We avoided them and stuck to the darkness. I figured the people who'd kidnapped Lord Clophel probably had men on the lookout, and we wanted to avoid a fight if possible.

I couldn't use my spells freely in such tight city quarters, for one thing. But more importantly, the enemy would almost certainly use Lord Clophel against us. My usual MO would be to simply send both captor and hostage flying with a not-quite-lethal spell, but treatment like that would probably give the poor old man a heart attack. Better to forgo that possibility with a stealthy slip into enemy territory.

"Stop," I urged Gourry quietly.

There was a small plaza just ahead of us. Well... less of a plaza and more of a small break between buildings. Perhaps there had been a structure there that was now long torn down. The ground was hardpack dirt with a lonely streetlamp at the center standing over a large pile of oversized refuse. We'd have to cross the space in order to reach our destination, but the plaza-not-plaza was pretty wide open... There was bound to be a lookout or two around. There was no way we'd make it through unseen, even through the fog.

We stowed away in the shadows beyond the lamplight and projected our senses to search for nearby signs of life.

"Two in the alley beyond," Gourry whispered.

"One to hold us off while the other sounds the alarm, I bet."

"Most likely. One of them seems pretty skilled."

"How skilled?"

"Remember those guys who attacked us at the palace? Probably not quite that good, but close."

"Tricky..."

Even if we could beat them in a fight, it would be better to avoid one.

“Is there another way around?” Gourry asked.

“Maybe, but they probably have guys doing shifts everywhere. Sneaking around trying to avoid them would just waste time. We need to break through, and fast.”

“But how?”

“Well... how about this?”

I whispered my plan into Gourry’s ear.

The two of us strode boldly into the plaza. We stayed along the edges of the lamplight, but kept our cool as we made a beeline for the two lookouts crouched in the alley beyond. My senses told me they were remaining in place as we approached... but they had also put up their guard as we remained obscured from each other by the dark and the mist.

“Anything to report?” Gourry asked, hushed.

No response. It seemed they weren’t expecting us to address them, leaving them uncertain about how to react.

“We just got word that the targets have left the palace. They’ll be headed this way soon,” Gourry continued on as we slowly moved closer. We could now clearly see the two lookouts down the alleyway. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t scare me like that,” one said, finally breaking the silence. “I thought you were them.”

“We are,” I replied... just as Gourry planted a fist in the man’s solar plexus.

“What—?!”

Before his cohort could even call out, Gourry landed a hard chop on the back of his neck. And with that, both sentries were out cold.

“I can’t believe they fell for it,” Gourry said in vague disbelief.

“Well, they’re probably just hired goons. There’s no way they all know each other on sight. So acting the way we did

—with a little help from the mist—just made them assume we were part of the gang. Anyway, we'd better hurry—" I started to say, then froze.

A presence had abruptly appeared behind me... a place I was sure had been unoccupied moments ago.

Gourry and I whipped around. Beneath the streetlights, shrouded in the pale fog, stood a man whose cold eyes were fixed on us. It was unmistakably...

Kanzel the sorcerer.

"It's been a while... Or so I'd say, but it hasn't really been all that long, has it?" he asked.

"What are you doing here? I thought you had a falling out with your employer and fled the palace," I asked, meeting his gaze.

But... whew, this guy! The pressure he put out was incredible. Just looking him in the eye got the sweat rolling down my cheeks. I already knew Kanzel was a force to be reckoned with, but seeing him here and now... he might be even more of a monster than I'd thought!

"It's true that we've parted ways," he said unflinchingly. "It seems my sponsor didn't care for my methods. I suppose that stands to reason... I found his conditions rather stifling myself. His demand to act under the radar and suppress my magical power resulted in a number of failures."

"So... what exactly do you want?" I managed to squeeze out of my throat, which felt like dried straw.

Gourry swiftly drew the Sword of Light. He must have felt it, too, instinctively—if we let our guard down for a second, we were dead meat. That was the kind of threat we were dealing with here.

"What do I want, you ask?" A thin smile appeared on Kanzel's face. "I think you know, Lina Inverse... I mean to kill you."

"Why?!"

"I have no need to explain myself."

And with that... *Vwish!* Kanzel disappeared. The next thing I knew, a presence appeared behind me.

“What?!”

I immediately turned around... and right in front of my eyes was Kanzel’s outstretched palm, glowing with pale blue magical light.

No way! I can’t dodge that!

“Die.”

Kffffwish! The ball of energy he unleashed broke up just before it hit me. Gourry had used the Sword of Light to block it in the nick of time before promptly slashing at Kanzel with a backswing. Kanzel evaded with a leap backward, then vanished as promptly as he’d appeared.

Above us?!

This time, rather than looking, I simply jumped away. A split second later, balls of pale blue light rained down where I’d just been standing. They were small, but I knew any one would be lethal with a direct hit.

“Very impressive,” Kanzel said with admiration, hovering in the air against the backdrop of the night. “If you’d bothered to look up, that would have been all the opportunity I needed.”

“You can’t be...” I said hoarsely.

Blinking through space without even reciting a spell, much less gathering and firing magic in an instant... That shouldn’t be possible. No, it *wasn’t* possible—for a human.

“Oh, come now.” He smiled thinly as he touched back down upon the ground. Gourry took a good swing at him from behind, but the sorcerer dissolved once more into the darkness and reappeared beneath the streetlight. “That fool Seigram could do this much. Is it so surprising that I can as well?”

“Seigram?!” Gourry and I cried in unison.

He was talking about a demon we once tangled with in a harrowing fight. While we beat him, he nearly killed us for the trouble. Worse yet, we didn’t actually manage to finish

him off. I had a feeling we'd see him again, and yet... to hear someone speak of him so trivially...

"You're a demon?!" Gourry exclaimed.

"I am. To think a humanlike appearance would make you so blind to my true nature... You humans really are pathetic," Kanzel mocked.

I didn't have time to argue. I was already reciting a spell under my breath.

Still, I knew it was unlikely that my magic could beat him. That bug back at the palace—which I was now almost certain had been summoned by Kanzel—soaked up an Asher Dist with barely a flinch. How powerful was he, then, to control something like that?

A Dragon Slave might be able to take him out, but if I used that in the middle of a city, the collateral damage would be unfathomable. In fact, in a Venn diagram of spells you could safely cast inside a city and spells that could actually hurt a demon... the intersection was woefully small and underwhelming. My arsenal available under the circumstances would require me to score at least a few dozen successive hits to take him down.

That left us only Gourry's Sword of Light to rely on, and landing a solid blow with that would be tricky considering Kanzel's blinking ability... But regardless of the odds, we simply had to get the job done.

"Let's go!" Gourry shouted, taking off in a run as I fell into line behind him.

"You're fast!" Kanzel praised as he disappeared before our charge.

Gourry's sword cut fruitlessly through the air. I quickly leaped away. Staying in one place for long would be inviting another surprise attack from a yet-unknown direction. This time, he reappeared a little to the right of the streetlamp.

"Elemekia Lance!" I cried, firing my spell the moment I detected his presence.

It was a magical lance meant to do astral damage to

demons, but I didn't think it would do much against Kanzel. It was really my only option at the time, but even if it hit...

"Pathetic," he whispered as he simply brushed it aside. "You can't defeat me like that."

With those words came a searing flash of light, which was especially effective against my dark-adjusted pupils.

"Gwuh!"

My eyes were stinging and I was effectively blind, but I didn't have time to sit and sulk about it. I jumped to the right and felt something hot pass just to the left of my head —then an explosion behind me. I'd managed to dodge one hit, but could I keep this up until my vision recovered?

As my gears were turning, I felt several new presences arrive on the scene. Most likely, Lord Clophel's kidnappers had overheard our fight with Kanzel and come running. This could be my break!

I set illumination to maximum and duration to zero, and threw a spell at the newly arriving figures...

"Lighting!"

"Wuh?!"

The men screamed and scrambled, temporarily blinded. In the confusion, I dove into their ranks. *Sorry, fellas!* I just needed some warm bodies to shield me from Kanzel. I knew he wouldn't hesitate to attack through bystanders, but I had to buy time somehow to recover my sight.

"Tch!" Kanzel clicked his tongue before disappearing again.

Where will he come from next?! Above, or—

I scanned the area with my senses fervently, but I couldn't detect Kanzel anywhere. Instead, I felt a number of additional presences approaching from an alley. Probably more of Lord Clophel's abductors. But, dang it, my sight wasn't quite back yet!

"Lina!" I heard Gourry call. He then grabbed my hand, apparently having recovered already. "You're okay?!"

"I think so..." I replied. "Where's Kanzel?"

“Don’t know. He just vanished. How’re you doing?”

“My vision’s still a little blurry... Swordplay’s out of the question, but I think I can swing just about anything else.”

“Enemies abound. The alleys are too narrow for us to break through their ranks. We’ll have to use a flight spell to pass overhead. Can you manage that?”

“I’ll give it a try!” I said and began the chant.

Before Kanzel had shown up, I’d been holding off on my travel magic in the event the enemy had someone who could sense it. But the cat was out of the bag now, so I just grabbed Gourry and held on tight.

“Lei Wing!”

And with that, we ascended.

“You made it pretty far. Credit where it’s due,” spat the man standing between us and our destination.

My hope had been to just smash our way in before the enemy could react, but their hideout turned out to be a pretty big abandoned apartment building with no lights on inside. It would take time to search every nook and cranny, meaning the captors could easily make off with Lord Clophel through another exit while we searched for him.

So, instead of all that mess, I landed in the hopes of grabbing a local to give us a little tour, you could say... And now we found ourselves here, cut off by this guy. Probably the commander.

“Hey, thanks for greeting us with that old cliche. Now, how about you make this easy and hand over the old man you kidnapped? I’ll make it worth your while... by, you know, not killing you maybe?”

“Sounds to me like you don’t care what we do to the hostage,” the man countered, seemingly unperturbed by my threat.

“Sure, go ahead and kill him if you really want. But that’ll mean there’s nothing holding us back from just murdering you lot. And, in case there’s any doubt, yeah—we walk the

walk as far as that goes.”

“I know,” he replied condescendingly. “But you should know the old man is too valuable for us to kill. There’s someone here in this building quietly watching what happens, though... and if you try anything funny, he’ll cut off one of the old man’s hands.”

“What?!” we cried in unison.

“And if you ignore *that* warning, he’ll lose the other one too. You can try to take one of us hostage, but we’re all mercenaries who don’t owe a thing to each other. The guy watching from the shadows won’t hesitate to cut the old man to pieces.”

Dammit... I didn’t know who’d come up with this plan, but they sure knew their way around a hostage situation. Gourry and I were now powerless to force our way through.

“So, what’s it gonna be?” the commander asked, a big, threatening grin on his face.

“Okay... fine. Gourry, drop your sword.”

“Right.”

With no other choice, we gave up our weapons. A few other men then came out to tie our hands behind our backs.

“Guess we got ourselves captured, huh?” Gourry grumbled.

“That’s just how the cookie crumbled. But we’ll make it work, right?” I replied.

“Listen to yourself... Do you even realize how bad this is?”

“Just shut up and walk, okay?” the commander demanded, annoyed by our bickering.

We were being led further into the building by a number of seedy-looking figures. It was a large apartment complex, weathered and abandoned. The candlesticks our escorts were holding gave us flickering glimpses of the dingy walls. The air was damp and heavy, permeated by a faint rank smell.

I couldn’t deny it made for a great hideout, but it was also

pretty dang depressing. Spending too much time in a place like this could really warp a person. I mean, I guess it was already too late for these guys anyway...

"You don't have to tell me, but I do have a question. Is Lord Clophel really alive and well?" I asked.

"You'll see him soon enough," the commander replied.

"Please don't say 'in hell,'" I groaned with a roll of my eyes.

"Don't worry. I won't kill you until you've played your part."

"In other words, you'd totally kill us if we didn't have a part to play?"

"I'll leave that to your imagination."

Our back-and-forth continued as we made our way deeper into the building. I could have busted out at any time, but it seemed wiser to wait until they took us to Lord Clophel.

"Ah, of course. The basement, right?"

"Shut up."

We then descended a stone staircase, the air growing stickier as we went. A door awaited us at the bottom.

"This is it," the man said, cracking it open before freezing on the spot.

Someone was already inside... Someone I wasn't thrilled to see.

"I've been waiting," said Zuma the assassin quietly, his eyes focused on me.

"Wh-What do you want?" the commander said, clearly panicked.

Zuma was standing just on the other side of the door, so I couldn't see what was going on inside.

"I came to kill that girl. Let me have her," he replied with perfect calm.

"Don't be stupid!" the commander shouted, suddenly angry. "You're that assassin Kanzel hired, aren't you? Well, he's out of the picture now and we need these hostages for

our plan! I don't take orders from you!"

I doubted this guy was especially interested in saving my life; he more so seemed to be offended by Zuma's attitude. I tell ya, that kind of pride can be the death of you...

"I see..." Zuma swiftly stepped out of the room, approaching the commander. "If we're no longer affiliated, then I have no need to hold back."

Then, with a strangely leisurely motion, Zuma leaped through the air and...

Crack!

I couldn't see exactly what happened from where I was standing, but I could tell the commander's neck had snapped. Before his body could even hit the floor, Zuma was past him and leaping at me. His movements seemed effortless, but they were fast—too fast and too sudden for the other men to react. I quickly drew back and began to chant a spell, but...

"Arrgh!" one man cried as he flew into Zuma.

Or, rather, as he was kicked into Zuma by Gourry. Zuma tried to dodge the unexpected human projectile, but being on a narrow staircase didn't make that easy. He ended up entangled with the man, the both of them rolling down the stairs and through the door.

That seemed to snap the other men out of their daze.

"You cur!"

"Get him!"

They all drew their swords and charged after the assassin, giving me time enough to finish my incantation.

"Bram Fang!"

The arrow of wind I unleashed cut the ropes binding Gourry's hands. He then ran over to the commander with the broken neck and retrieved our swords. And by the time he made it back to me and cut my hands free, the battle below was decided.

We charged down into the basement, which was a vast and empty space. It must have been used as a storeroom at

some point. Lord Clophel was further in, tied to a chair.

“Oh! It’s you two!” he cried joyfully.

Thankfully he seemed safe after all, but this was no time for a catch-up chat. The Lighting spell shining down from the ceiling illuminated the bodies littering the floor. The only man left standing was Zuma.

“Can you beat him?” I asked.

“Dunno,” Gourry replied uncertainly.

The assassin slowly turned to face us.

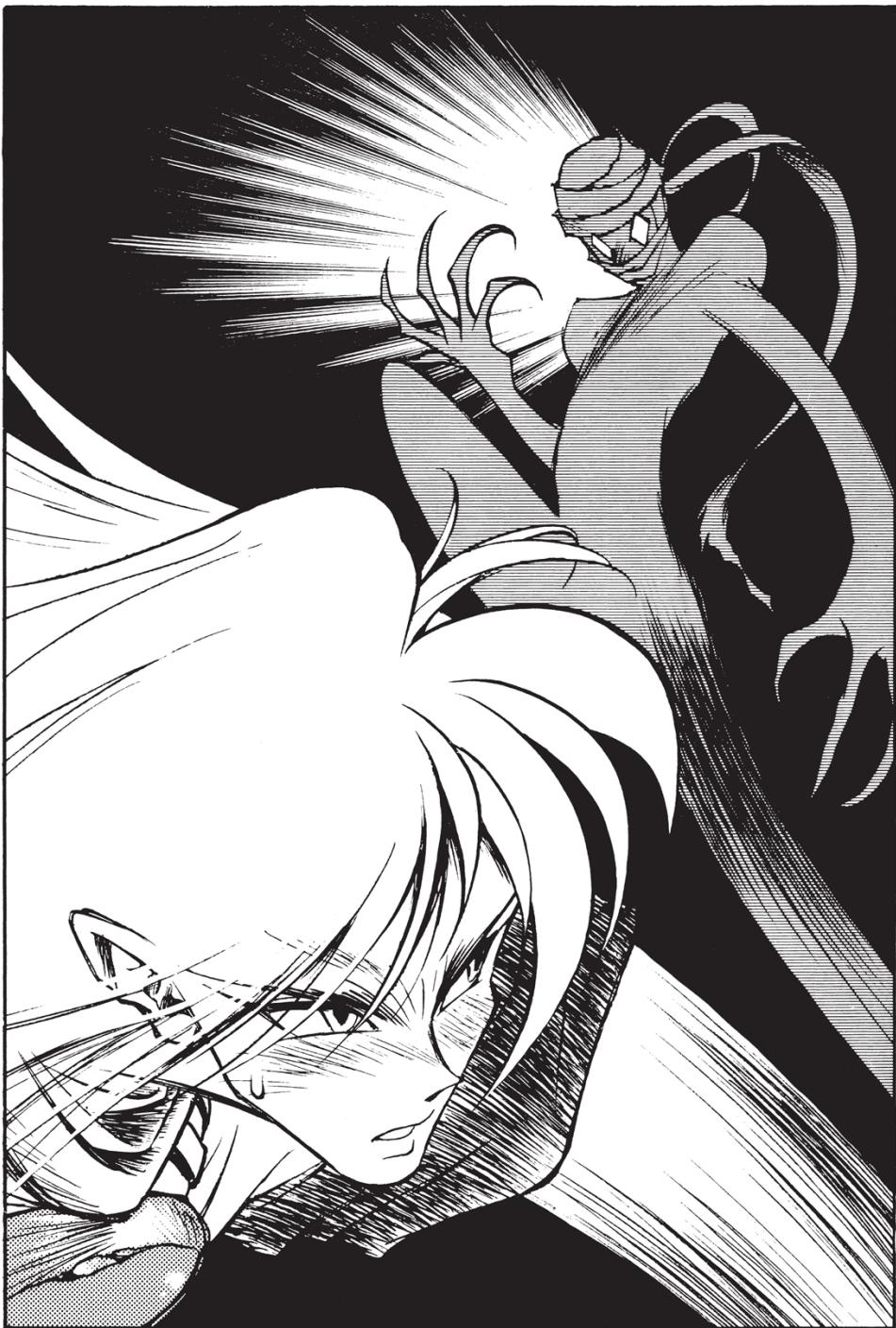
“Get out of my way,” he said quietly to Gourry.

“You really think I’ll do that?” he replied defiantly, holding his sword at the ready as he stood between the two of us.

The assassin moved slowly and carefully. He seemed to perceive Gourry’s skill, as he didn’t charge right for him. I knew, however, that Gourry could be in real trouble if Zuma managed to get off his spell that shrouded the room in darkness...

That meant I couldn’t give him time to chant! I immediately made a break for Lord Clophel.

Zuma seemed shaken for a moment, and his hesitation over whether to pursue me or to go for Gourry first generated an opening. Gourry charged! Zuma dodged the swing of his longsword in the nick of time by ducking.



Ugh, so close! But Gourry's swordsmanship seemed to have the assassin on the ropes. He was backing him into a wall, bit by bit. Heroic sagas were full of overconfident fools who let their hubris get the better of them in situations like this, spelling their downfall. Thankfully, Gourry wasn't that careless. He kept lunging at Zuma, slowly and surely cornering him... until the assassin suddenly dropped to the floor and rolled toward Gourry. This would ordinarily be where you finished a guy off with a stomp and a backhand slash, but against someone like Zuma, that might just earn you a broken foot.

Letting him get too close would put Gourry at a disadvantage too, so he preemptively leaped away. When he did, Zuma snapped his body, using the momentum to right himself and take off running... right at me!

“No!” Gourry shouted.

I hastily readied my sword, still chanting.

Bam! Zuma sprung up off the floor with great force. He then planted a hand on the ceiling and pushed against it to kick down at me. Trying to counterattack would only get me killed. I sprang back without hesitation. And just as Zuma landed... he was greeted with a ball of light to the face.

“Lighting!”

“Gah!” he cried as it scorched his eyes.

It wasn't me who cast the spell, though. (If I had, Zuma would have easily dodged it.) It was Lord Clophel.

The unexpected attack forced the assassin to stagger back a few steps. He then promptly fled up the stairs, dashing to escape. It would be dangerous to pursue, of course, so Gourry didn't.

“Guess we're rid of him for now,” he said in an unusually somber tone—granted, you'd have to be stupid or crazy to be in a good mood after tangling with that guy.

“Thank you for the help, Lord Clophel,” I said as I untied him.

“Oh, I'm the one who should be thanking you. That's the

only spell I can use... I never expected it to be good for more than reading at night." He then continued as he rubbed his unbound wrists, "Some of the men that assassin felled before you arrived are still breathing, I think. When he first came in, I saw him drop my guards... but I don't believe he killed them. They could make for useful witnesses."

Lord Clophel was right; four of the men on the floor were unconscious. The rest were all dead, killed with a single strike from Zuma. We tied the survivors up, and then Gourry woke one of them up for us.

"Ugh..." he groaned as he looked around, freezing when he came to appreciate the situation.

"How are you feeling?" I asked with the coldest tone I could manage.

"Y-You... Damn that Kanzel! He double-crossed us for firing him!" he gasped, his eyes stricken with fear.

He seemed to be under a misapprehension, but I was under no obligation to correct it.

"Better keep your voice down," I said. "You knew what you were signing up for when you took this job, right? Surely you were prepared for... this."

"A-Are they all dead?" the man asked, looking around at the bodies on the floor.

"They don't look very alive to me. Care to join them?"

"No! Please, no!"

"Then answer my question: Who was it that hired you?"

"I... I don't know! I really don't!"

A blatant lie. But rather than asking again, I decided to take a more efficient route to an answer.

"All right. If you don't know, you don't know," I said casually, then smiled coldly. "You have three living companions, so I'll ask them instead. In the meantime, you can join your comrades."

I thumbed back at the corpses, and the man went pale. To add a little gravitas to my bluff, Gourry seized his head from behind.

"Wait! Please, wait! I'll tell you anything!" he shouted in panic.

"I thought you didn't know jack."

"I'll tell you what I *do* know! So please, don't kill me!"

I folded my arms and made a big show of thinking it over before saying, "Hmm... All right. Tell me everything you can. If I like what I hear, I'll spare you."

"You want to know who's behind this, right? Right?" he pleaded, suddenly very cooperative indeed. He must've really been scared. "You've probably met the guy. He's a member of the royal family... He always covered his face when we met and wouldn't give his name, but when he was talking with that Kanzel bastard, I heard Kanzel say it! And I'll tell you!"

"Enough with the buildup. It's Christopher, right?"

"No," the man said with a sudden, disarming grin.
"Alfred."

"Say whaaat?!" Gourry, Lord Clophel, and I all cried in unison.

"Are you serious?" I asked after regaining my decorum.

"Yeah. Said he was lighting a fire under his dad's ass or something."

"But they attacked Alfred too!"

"Oh, that?" the man said casually. "One of my buddies was in on that job... It was apparently really sudden. Someone on the inside let them into the palace. 'Go to stand-alone building such-and-such. When you hear banging on the wall from the inside, attack. But don't lay a hand on a *certain person*.' That was the deal."

I played the events back in my head. I remembered Alfred pacing around the room anxiously and pounding on the wall. Making himself look like one of the victims to divert suspicion... It was a pretty plausible scenario, now that I thought about it.

"Anything else?" I urged him.

"He said everything was going great at first, but then that Kanzel bastard suddenly started acting weird. Said he broke from the plan to attack someone *other* than who he was supposed to kill... so they blew up at each other and parted ways."

"So how does Kanzel know Alfred, exactly?"

"I... I dunno. I wasn't the guy's babysitter or nothin'..."

It was easy to imagine, though. Kanzel probably knew Sir Phil and I were acquainted. And suspecting that I'd come sniffing around when I got wind of the succession plot, he'd joined up with Alfred the would-be usurper. It was definitely playing the long game... but even for a demon, tracking down a traveling sorcerer on rumor alone would be all but impossible. Especially when said sorcerer was as much-rumored as *me*.

But in the end, here we were. Kanzel's plan had worked. I still don't know why he wanted me dead, but it seemed he'd cooked up a scenario where I ended up collateral damage in a family squabble. Yet even after going to the trouble of hiring an assassin, I was still breathing. And now after falling out with Alfred, he'd put an abrupt end to his elaborate scheme and come after us outright.

"Anything else?" I asked the man.

He shook his head, but I'd already heard more than enough. We had our witness, so it was time to confront the culprit!

Things had more or less worked themselves out. The current plan was to take our captives back to the palace and get them to confess to the whole plot. Sir Phil could handle things from there and our work would be done.

But... two problems remained. The first was obvious: even after our job was technically over, Kanzel and Zuma would still be out there. They weren't exactly just going to drop this.

"Why so glum, Lina?" Gourry asked.

“Well, you know...” I responded vaguely.

“Kanzel stuff?”

I nodded. Of course, stewing over it wouldn’t solve anything.

We were currently on the way back to the palace after saving Lord Clophel. Gourry was pulling along the four survivors, who were tied together.

By the time we’d left the building, the night fog had grown a little thicker and Alfred’s hired men were gone. I doubted they’d run away; they were probably just regrouping elsewhere.

That brought us to our second problem: we were probably in for another ambush before we made it to the palace. And this time, the enemy would come at us with everything they had. It would be hard to fight with four hostages and Lord Clophel in tow. We were just gonna have to pull out all the stops ourselves.

At last, our little parade came out on the main avenue. The streetlamps shone like pale blue orbs in the mist. I could see human figures down the street through the fog—thirty or forty of them—standing between us and the palace.

“Figured they’d be waiting for us.”

At my words, one of the figures swept back his hair with a theatrical gesture and took a step forward.

“We were indeed, my dear,” he said.

At that greeting, I raised an eyebrow.

“Oho... I didn’t expect a personal welcome, Sir Alfred.”

“Someone relayed the situation to me. I thought it would be only right to address you myself.”

“Appreciate the trouble.”

“Honestly, you’re no *end* of trouble... You’ve done nothing but muddle my plans since you arrived.”

“That might be karma, actually. Try being less of an ass.”

“How insulting...”

“Plenty more where that came from!”

“No, that’s enough talk. It’s high time we settled this.”

"I agree," I said, drawing my sword.

And then...

"The girl is mine," echoed a sonorous voice through the night mist.

Geh! This guy again!

"You, eh?" A wry smile appeared on Alfred's face. "You interfered before, I'm told, but... very well. It doesn't matter who kills them, just as long as they're dead. Do as you wish."

"Happy to oblige," said the voice, now from behind me.

I turned to see a night-cloaked shadow—Zuma the assassin. We were flanked.

"Hey now, don't I get a say in this?" complained Gourry, pointing his just-drawn sword at Zuma. "I'm her guardian, remember? If you want to fight her, you have to go through me."

"Hmm..." Zuma hummed pensively for a moment, then said in a low voice, "If you insist."

No matter how skilled he might be, Zuma couldn't fight me while also fending off Gourry. He was only making the logical choice.

"Really, everyone, fight whomever you like," Alfred said languidly. "And now we have all that sorted out... let's get started, shall we?"

"Sleeping!"

My spell kicked things off... but my targets were the four hostages. They were tied up already, but anything they tried to pull during the fight would only be a liability. As they slumped to the ground, Gourry lunged at Zuma behind me. I took the opportunity to start my next spell, charging straight for the group of men down the street.

"Go!" Alfred ordered, unleashing his band against me.

I just charged straight into them: "Mega Brand!"

Crash! A ripple ran through the flagstones of the street, and the moment it reached the band of men, the ground below them blasted upward into the night sky. I quickly leaped back and prepared another spell. I considered

rushing through the crowd and taking Alfred hostage, but then they might take Lord Clophel in exchange, which would put us in a stalemate.

“Vun Ga Ruim!” Alfred shouted, holding his hands high.

Oh, right... He's got magic too.

Vshhhhh! A sound like the swarming of insects rose up around him, and some sort of black mist raced along the ground. It looked a little like the darkness spell Zuma had used before, but...

This mist billowed up from the ground and took the form of several figures. They were humanoid and black as night, with hazy silhouettes—shadow beasts! These were low-level magical beasts that lived on the astral plane, capable of clinging to opponents and draining away their life force. They were definitely high up on the creepy scale... But their existence was extremely unstable. They couldn't survive even a full day on their own—not that I had that long to wait!

Still, as low-level as they were, they were resistant to physical attacks and most elemental spells. And sadly, I didn't have time to switch up incantations.

“Fireball!”

Since it wouldn't do any good against the shadow beasts, I unleashed this bad boy on Alfred's men nearby. The ball of pale blue light streaked toward them...

“Break!”

...And burst into ten with a snap of my fingers, peppering the area with small explosions.

The men screamed. The explosions were small, but they could be plenty fatal if you were close enough. I took out a bunch of guys that way, but more than half their band still remained. They already had me surrounded, too... If only I could buy some time, I could retake the initiative. And if the city guard heard the chaos and came running, Alfred would be finished...

Of course, they knew that as well as I did and were gonna

pull out all the stops to finish things before then. One of his men charged at me, but I managed to block his strike with my sword.

“Dust Chip!” I cried.

The air glittered in the hazy lamplight and I quickly leaped back. The man slicing at me recoiled with a scream. Dust Chip was a spell that unleashed countless tiny ice arrows from my fingertips. It was weak and close-range only, but when it hit, it sure did sting!

“Diem Wind!” Alfred shouted, taking the next move.

His spell of choice conjured a blast of wind to hold an opponent at bay. It covered a wide area, which made it difficult to dodge, so rather than brute force it, I jumped back and let it wash over me. *Vwoosh!* The blast howled in my ears. My breath caught in my throat for a second, interrupting my chant.

All this time, the shadow beasts were creeping up on me. My only hope of fighting them was with magic, meaning I'd have to get an incantation off... Was that why Alfred kept needling me with minor spells?!

While I was distracted, I heard a yelp from behind me...

Oh no! Lord Clophel! I turned around in time to see the sword clattering to the ground from his hands. I quickly chanted a spell to try to save him, but one of Alfred's men was already closing on him bit by bit, sword drawn.

“Die, old man!” he shouted, raising his blade aloft.

No! I'm not gonna make it!

“Bram Blazer!”

A streak of blue light darted through the night sky and bowled over the would-be assassin just in time!

That was—

“What?!” Alfred quickly scanned the area.

A figure was standing on the second-floor terrace of an old shop along the avenue.

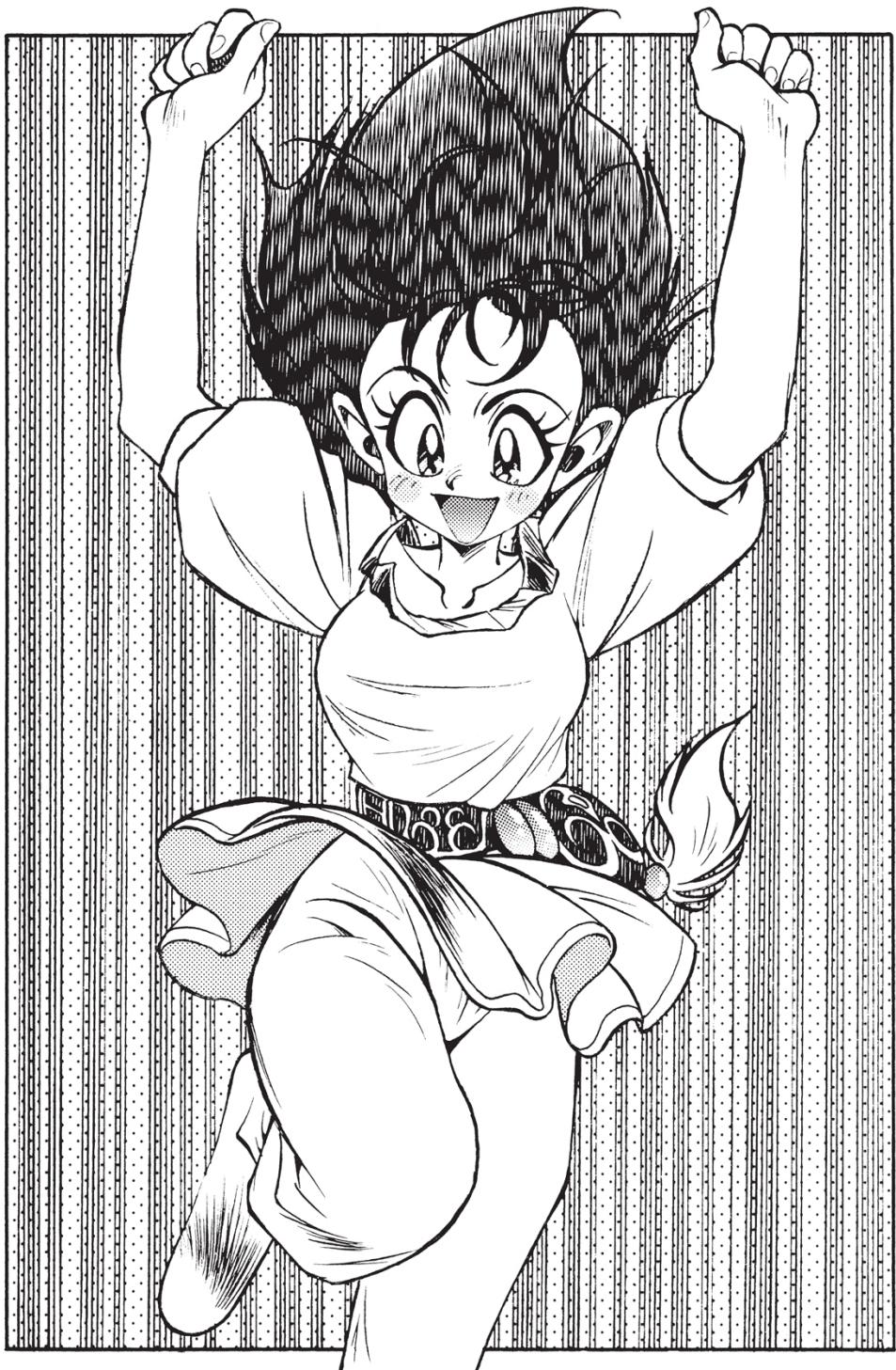
“Impossible!” Alfred shouted, his eyes wide. “What are you doing here, Amelia?!”

4: Welp, Guess We'd Better Finish This

“Hah, I could smell your foul schemes leagues away,” Amelia declared, her vestments flapping in the wind. “Though you may deceive the world, you could never deceive me!”

And with that heaping spoonful of nonsense, she cast aside her robes to reveal the loose-fitting white outfit she was wearing underneath. It looked much easier to move around in.

“Hup!” she shouted as she leaped.



"Wow!" the crowd remarked in awe.
She flipped off of the veranda, then...
Splat!

...missed the landing and kissed pavement.

Oof, that had to hurt...

After what felt like a silent eternity, Amelia sprung back to her feet and dusted herself off as if nothing had happened. Seemed like she was made of pretty stern stuff... Must've gotten that from her dad.

With a finger dramatically pointed at Alfred, she proclaimed, "The jig is up, Al! Turn yourself in!"

"Dammit!" He bared his teeth. "How did you know? When did you figure me out?!"

"Hah, simple! I was looking out over the garden because I couldn't sleep, and I saw you sneak out! I followed you out of curiosity, only to witness you meet up with these ruffians and attack Mistress Lina! That's when it occurred to me!"

Yeah, uh... it would have occurred to anyone at that point. Not really something to brag about...

Wait, did that mean that—after the fight had started—she climbed all the way up to the terrace and just *waited around* until Lord Clophel was in trouble? How did this girl's mind work?

Nevertheless, when Alfred heard her accusation, he simply grinned.

"I see... That means I'll have to kill you too," he said, his eyes dancing with madness.

"I wouldn't try it," I said in disgust. "There's only one way this scenario ends for a second-rate villain like you."

"Villain?!" Alfred shouted angrily. "Nonsense! You clods could never understand! I serve the greater good here, for I am most fit to rule this country! If I were king, I'd make this country even bigger and more prosperous than ever! With me as our leader, we could even rule the entire world!"

I take back what I said before. This guy was third-rate *at best*.

"Heh. Very well," Amelia said as she stepped forward.
"Then prove your righteousness... by defeating me!"

If Alfred was a third-rate villain, Lady Amelia was a wannabe superhero. I felt like I was watching some scene out of an epic.

"Don't interfere, Mistress Lina," she said, following the tropes of heroic sagas to the letter.

On the bright side, this meant I could focus on picking off small fry and protecting Lord Clophel, which would be easy as pie. Lucky Lina!

But while we were out there flapping our gums, the deathmatch between Gourry and Zuma continued to unfold behind me. It was like they were in a world of their own. Poor Gourry'd really drawn the short straw here... which, yeah, I'd kind of forced into his hand, but still...

Gourry should have had the upper hand given his sword, but Zuma had magic. Gourry would seemingly back the assassin into a corner, and he'd retaliate by forcing Gourry on the defensive with a spell he'd been chanting.

"Darn it, this is going nowhere..." Gourry whispered.

Zuma, however, remained silent. Knowing that complaining wouldn't improve the situation any, Gourry tried slashing at him again. And again, Zuma inched back.

Their battle kept edging toward us, until it reached Lord Clophel... who quickly retreated in my direction. Smart guy.

The fight made it as far as the man Amelia had taken out with her spell earlier, where Zuma decided to switch up his tactics.

"Dark Mist!" he hissed.

An eerie darkness spread out from where he stood, swiftly covering the area.

"Wugh?!" Gourry quickly retreated, so as not to be drawn into the encroaching darkness. A figure suddenly sprung from it after him. "Hah!"

Gourry thrust his sword, piercing his target... but it wasn't Zuma! Skewered on Gourry's blade was the victim of

Amelia's earlier spell. Zuma had tossed the fallen man lying at his feet out of the darkness at Gourry in order to occupy his sword.

Weaving around the corpse, then, the real Zuma rushed straight at Gourry. Against any other opponent or wielding anything other than the Sword of Light, Gourry likely wouldn't have hesitated to cast his blade aside. But he did hesitate... and for a second, I couldn't follow what happened with my eyes. Zuma's hands moved, and his body went into a roll. Gourry dipped forward, and...

Zing! A high, clear noise rang into the night.

His sword snapped while he himself rolled along the ground with a kick from Zuma.

"Flare Arrow!" Alfred cast first.

Lady Amelia didn't even try to dodge it. Alfred's dozen or so arrows of flame were deflected in various random directions without even touching her—the work of a wind barrier!

"What?!" Alfred exclaimed, his eyes wide as he quickly moved on to his next chant.

This was one that I recognized. He clearly knew minor spells couldn't penetrate Lady Amelia's wind barrier, so he was going for something bigger. And even as that was unfolding, his shadow beasts were slowly closing in on her. But with no sign of panic, she just started quietly chanting some new spell.

"Dis Fang!" Alfred incanted, finishing his spell before she did.

The shadow he cast in the Lighting of the streetlamps elongated unnaturally, taking the shape of a dragon's maw. Once again, he'd summoned a low-level magical beast from the astral plane into his own shadow.

Not good! If that thing bit Lady Amelia, it would damn near kill her... And unlike Shadow Snap, this spell couldn't be dispelled with Lighting. The shadow dragon opened its

massive jaws and rushed toward her!

Needless to say, I had my hands full while this was going down. I was defending Lord Clophel and fending off the hired goons. They weren't first-rate fighters or anything... but there were a heck of a lot of 'em. I had leisure enough to keep up with Gourry and Lady Amelia's respective fights, but not enough to offer any real support. I was hoping I could wipe out the riffraff and go help one of them, but...

"Graaah! This is so annoying!"

My next spell sent a few more goons flying.

Whip! Gourry sprang up a moment later. He'd probably protected himself from the brunt of Zuma's kick by leaning forward and taking it with his breastplate. But by the time he was back on his feet, Zuma was already running at him full tilt again. Readying his broken sword, Gourry drew back and reached his left hand into his breast pocket.

"Fireball!" Zuma shouted, conjuring a pale blue light in front of his chest.

In that exact instant, Gourry's left hand blurred and Zuma leaped away.

Vwoom! An explosion briefly dyed the night fog orange. Gourry had flicked a pebble at Zuma's Fireball, causing it to prematurely detonate in the assassin's face. But before the flames even died down, Zuma emerged from the smoke. Ready and waiting, Gourry took another swing!

"Flow Break!" Amelia's voice rang out loud and clear.

The ground around her was immediately aglow with a magical light similar to Lighting. It took the shape of a six-pointed star, surrounded Alfred's shadow dragon and shadow beasts, and then unleashed a blinding flash.

Alfred just stood there, voiceless and gaping. His shadow creatures had all disappeared with the light.

Lady Amelia's spell probably functioned on the same principle I'd used to escape Kanzel's strange pocket

dimension. The shadowy magical beasts, having been summoned against their will, had a tenuous connection to this world. The momentary opening of a gate back to their own, under the influence of a six-pointed barrier that represented balance between worlds, sent them back where they belonged.

"I-Impossible!" Alfred looked around in disbelief, and by the time he looked back to Lady Amelia... she was on top of him. "What?!"

Smack! Her elbow caught Alfred clean in the jaw. He reeled over and collapsed onto his back. He didn't move a muscle after that. The dude was done.

And it was just about then that I finally finished off the last of the small fry.

Gourry brought his broken sword down on Zuma, who would have still been just out of its reach even if the blade were whole. But Gourry hadn't misjudged the distance. No, as he swung his sword, the blade ejected from its hilt and flew toward Zuma at close range. He'd apparently unfastened it at the same time he detonated the Fireball.

Zuma had no time to dodge, so he instead deflected it by batting it away by the flat side of the blade. His movements were almost inhuman, but...

It gave Gourry a momentary opening.

"Light, come forth!" he howled, conjuring a brilliant blade from his sword handle.

Zuma moved swiftly to dodge it, but—*Crack!*—the light caught him in the shoulder! Zuma then dove back. Gourry tried to catch him with a backhand slice, but it only grazed the assassin's coat. His first strike, however, had lopped Zuma's right arm off at the shoulder.

The match was all but decided now. Perhaps realizing that he'd lost, Zuma quickly moved to retreat. He leaped back through the air...

Which was exactly what I was waiting for. No way was I

about to let someone so dangerous escape.

“Flare Lance!”

The instant Zuma’s feet left the ground, I predicted his trajectory and let my spell fly! There was no dodging this one!

Except—shockingly—Zuma batted aside the flaming spear with his remaining hand, dispersing the crimson flame! It was better than taking a direct hit, sure, but it was still a crazy reckless thing to do... With his left hand now turned totally to ash, the assassin disappeared down the dark road.

“Looks like it’s over,” Lady Amelia whispered.

I gave a firm nod. This should put an end to the chaos in Saillune... But for me? I wasn’t out of the woods yet.

I had to wonder... Just how powerful was the demon Kanzel?

Dawn broke with the palace in a flurry. We’d made it back, explained things to Sir Phil, and thrown the unconscious Alfred into one of the stand-alone buildings with a guard posted on him.

Christopher was our biggest problem now. It seemed Alfred had been the main culprit all along, but his father was certainly involved. The question was... to what extent?

Sir Phil took me and Gourry to look for Christopher. We found him sitting alone on a sofa in the palace’s entry hall, staring out into space. He’d probably already heard about Alfred’s capture, which had taken a toll on him. He looked like he’d aged overnight.

“Chris,” Sir Phil called to him.

“Is that you, Brother?” he whispered, turning to us with a self-reproaching smile on his face.

“I know everything,” Sir Phil said, taking a seat on the sofa across from him.

Gourry and I then sat down on either side of him. Royals always carried a dagger on them for self-protection, and we

were afraid that a desperate Christopher might suddenly lunge at Sir Phil if things went south.

The second prince, however, just nodded limply and said, "How's he... How's Al?"

"Still unconscious. I'm sure he'll wake up soon."

"I see..." he sighed.

A heavy silence hung over the room for a while. Both brothers seemed equally uncertain about where to go from here.

"The fault is really mine," Christopher finally said, stumbling over his words. "I filled his head with my designs... Ever since he was a child, I've done nothing but grumble about the unfairness of our circumstances. On and on about how I could have been king if only I'd been born sooner... So when he broached his plan to me, and introduced me to Kanzel outside the palace... far from stopping him, I encouraged him. Gleefully, even. I won't say I was out of my mind... No, though I knew it would lead to something like this, I pressed my ambitions onto my son and dragged him down into the mud with me... I regret it so much... as a father..."

There, the stricken prince sighed deeply again.

"Punish me however you see fit," he continued. "It's the price I deserve to pay for my life of greed. Perhaps it's the end I truly wanted. But he... Al is different. I foisted my wishes on him and made him believe they were his own. Call me an overindulgent father if you will, but if possible... please... I know it's selfish to ask, but... Please, my brother. Please don't be too hard on him..."

"How he's treated will depend entirely on him," Sir Phil replied.

Just then, I heard some ruckus among the soldiers outside. A figure then appeared in the door, silhouetted by the light behind him. It was Alfred, holding a sword in his hand.

"Al!?" Christopher and Sir Phil both exclaimed, leaping to

their feet at once.

There was a tumult of footsteps and the soldiers surrounded him at the door, keeping their distance.

"Stay back!" the young prince barked as he slowly staggered into the hall. His face was a contorted mask of madness.

"Al, how did you...?" his father called softly.

"I escaped, obviously. You really thought I'd just sit in that room?!"

"What about the guard?" Sir Phil asked in a quiet voice.

"The *guard*?!" A twisted grin spread across his lips. "Please! Why should I need a guard?! I do recall a soldier who didn't know his place, though... Do you know what he said to me?! 'I fear I can't let you leave'! Some nerve, wouldn't you say? So I reminded him of his fealty! He can serve me better in the next world!"

"Enough, Al!" Christopher said in a trembling voice.

The soldiers moved in to surround us, but the situation must have been utterly demoralizing. None of them actually charged the crazed prince.

"Stop this," his father called to him. "This has gone too far, Alfred! It's over... It's all over!"

"No!" Alfred shook his head passionately in response.

"No, no! You're wrong, Dad! It's not over! It's still not over!"

He glared at Sir Phil with bloodshot eyes and slowly crept closer. Sir Phil stood up as Gourry and I put our hands on our swords.

"Stop! Stop it!" Christopher insisted, putting himself between Sir Phil and Alfred.

"Get out of my way, Dad!" Alfred hissed through a clenched jaw, his teeth grinding audibly.

"Stop this, Al!" his father insisted again.

"Get out of my way!" he demanded as he leaped forward.

"Alfred!"

Crash! Christopher and Alfred collided... then Alfred slumped to the floor.

The boy's lips moved slightly. The only witness to his last words was Christopher... who'd stabbed his son with his self-defense dagger.

"Is this... how it must end?" Christopher whispered, a sorrowful smile on his face. "I'm a failure... as a father..."

With that, he turned his dagger to his own breast and...

Clap! Sir Phil seized his hand.

"Brother! But why?!" Christopher exclaimed.

Sir Phil replied softly, "Because... you're my brother."



It was dawn the next day. Lady Amelia poked her head into my room around the time we were preparing to head out.

“Leaving already?” she asked.

“Yeah, there’s something I still need to do,” I responded with forced cheer.

I was talking about settling things with Kanzel. I wasn’t looking forward to it, given how he could blink through space and all, but there was no need to worry Lady Amelia with gloom and doom.

“Hmm...” she hummed, peering into my eyes knowingly. “What are you hiding, Mistress Lina?”

“N-Nothing!” I waved my hand dismissively. “I’m not hiding anything. Certainly not sneaking amenities out of the room you so generously hosted me in...”

“Not that! I mean there’s something you know that you’re not telling us!”

“Like what?”

“Like... whoever’s trying to kill you. Probably Kanzel, I guess, since he went missing and all. But why? Who is he really?”

“Well, it’s complicated...” I answered vaguely.

I didn’t know exactly why he was after me, but it was clear the matter was unrelated to the succession dispute in Saillune. Telling her about it might only lead to more trouble.

“Complicated how?” Lady Amelia asked anyway, forcing the issue.

“Well, just complicated... Why are you so interested, anyway?”

“It gets my righteous blood racing,” she uttered nonsensically, clenching her right hand into a fist. “There’s been a lot going on lately, both on the surface and deep below. I can’t help feeling like there’s something looming on the horizon... Maybe it’s just a change in the tide or destiny taking its course or something, but my justice sense tells me that it’s *evil*.”

I knew that shrine maidens were often blessed with good intuition, but something about referring to it as her “justice sense” made it seem super fishy.

“And Mistress Lina... While it’s clear to me that you yourself are no evildoer, my instincts tell me that you’re involved somehow.”

I mean... she really wasn’t wrong on the whole “evil on the horizon” thing. But if I told her that, she’d probably use it as an excuse to tag along.

“You’re just overthinking things,” I said with a forced laugh.

A knock at the door snapped me out of my glassy-eyed stupor.

“Coming!”

I stood up from the bed and went to answer it.

“Hey,” said Gourry.

We were currently staying at an inn on the outskirts of Saillune. We could have made it out of the city before nightfall, but we’d ended up doing a little sightseeing and holing up here instead. I was just sitting around in my room after dinner, doing nothing, when my blond companion came knocking.

“What’s up, Gourry?” I asked.

“It’s just...” he answered vaguely as he took a seat in the chair by my nightstand.

I sat back down on the bed myself, and silence hung between us for a while.

“What’s wrong, Lina?” Gourry asked at last, gently.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, come on. You’re not acting like yourself. You were extra hyper when we were wandering around town today, but I could see you fall deep into thought every now and then. And you were silent all through dinner. Just tell me. What’s on your mind?”

“Mm...”

"I know it's probably not anything I can fix, but... Even if I can't, it can be nice to get things off your chest."

"..."

I didn't say anything for a while. The first floor of the inn was a bar, so we sat listening to the drunkards making merry from downstairs.

I sighed heavily after a time before beginning: "Well, I guess hiding it won't do us any good. This afternoon, Lady Amelia came to me and said, 'There's evil on the horizon, and I think you're involved somehow.'"

"That's alarming."

"Yeah, I guess... but it got me thinking."

"That it's karma catching up with you?"

"No! Seriously, why do you think Kanzel's after me?"

"Huh? I never really thought about it..." Gourry looked a little unsure, as if he couldn't understand why I'd brought it up. "I mean, I don't think we've met him before... He did say something about Seigram though, so I'd say maybe he went crying to Kanzel after we roughed him up... but that's silly. They're demons, not some crime family."

"Right?" I forced a smile onto my face.

"So, what are you thinking?"

"To be frank, I don't have the foggiest idea why Kanzel is after me. But it's possible... just maybe... What if it's not Kanzel who's after me, but demons in general?"

Gourry was silent in response to that.

"That would explain it, right?" I continued, unable to keep the depression out of my voice.

A while back, we fought a high-rank demon and—with a lot of luck—managed to take him out. That was Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu (a part of him, at least), the master of all demons in our world, who was split into seven pieces by Flare Dragon Ceifeed back in the days of myth. Yeah, I know, sounds like a fish story. But sometimes this stuff is true, okay?

To be honest, before that whole experience, I'd just

assumed the legends of the Dark Lord were half-truths at best. The story everyone knew (except Gourry, apparently) claimed that one of Shabranigdu's parts managed to revive a thousand years ago, and it was now locked in ice in the Katart Mountains, directing the demons of the world... Yeah, apparently that was also true. So would the being known as the Dark Lord of the North *really* just let me off the hook after I defeated one of his kindred?

Gourry had been involved in that incident too, so I expected he shared my concern.

"Why would demons as a whole have it out for you?" he asked, completely unfazed.

Oh, come on, man!

I'd assumed his earlier silence was because he was parsing the gravity of the situation, but I guess he actually just didn't understand what I was talking about.

"Remember when we first met and I used a spell more powerful than Dragon Slave to defeat the Dark Lord?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Ugh! Is it not obvious?!"

"Nope."

"Darn it... Word to the wise, pal: Thinking's a use-it-or-lose-it deal. Let your cerebrum atrophy and you'll end up totally dependent on your lizard brain."

"You're making it sound like I don't do any thinking at all."

"Do you? Ever?"

"Just say what you were going to say."

I know I should've been used to it at this point, but these little exchanges of ours still got to me.

"We proved that a mere human can defeat a pretty high-rank demon. Maybe, at the time we beat him, his consciousness was in tune with the other pieces... and now the Dark Lord of the North knows what's up and isn't happy about it. Maybe he thinks that, as someone who can use a spell more powerful than a Dragon Slave, I'm a threat to him.

What if he sent Kanzel to get rid of me? That would explain what Lady Amelia said.”

There, Gourry fell silent again.

“You follow me?” I asked.

“I... I do, but that means this is a pretty serious situation, huh?”

“Dead serious, yeah. It means that even if we beat Kanzel, we’re going to see more and more assassins sent our way. And they won’t stop trying to kill me until they succeed.”

“You seem pretty chill about all this...”

“The hell I am. But it’s all just a theory. There are still things it *doesn’t* explain.”

“Like what?”

“The attacks Kanzel used,” I said, raising a demonstrative finger. “If he really wanted me dead, he could’ve just blown up a whole city block... But all he used were those puny little attack spells. Why? There’s nothing obligating a demon to hold back against humans.”

“Maybe he was worried about collateral damage.”

“Yeah, right... Anyway, that’s one of the things I was thinking about.”

“Hmm... but it sounds like you’re determined to fight him again anyway.”

“Well, yeah. If we don’t settle things soon, he’ll keep coming after me... and, lemme tell ya, that’s gonna put a real crimp in my lifestyle.”

“Then why don’t you just ask him about it? I’m sure he’d be happy to explain the situation.”

Hmm... it was true there was some kind of unwritten rule that villains had to cackle and reveal all their plans during the final battle. (At least, that was the going rate in my experience.)

“Well, that might work, but... I feel like I should work on some hypotheses in preparation.”

“Will that actually help you beat him?”

“No, but...”

"Then maybe you'd be better off *not* thinking so much about it."

"Maybe."

I found myself smirking. For once, Gourry was right.

"All right." Feeling refreshed, I stretched. "Now then, let's lift our spirits with a little midnight snack at the bar downstairs. I'm buying tonight."

"Wow, that's a rare treat," he said as he stood up.

"One dish max!"

We stopped abruptly.

We were just outside of the city. Behind us stood the white buildings and hustle and bustle of Saillune, bathed in the noontime sun. Scattered forest stretched before us. A road cut straight through it, which would take us through several large cities on our way to the Kingdom of Gailia.

And dead ahead was Kanzel, leaned up against a tree.

"Did we keep you waiting long?" I snarked.

"Not at all in the scheme of the life I've lived."

I knew we couldn't fight here. If we went all-out, the city would end up taking most of the damage. I wanted to change locations, but...

Kanzel walked out onto the road, then casually turned his back to us.

"There's a good place to fight up ahead. Follow me," he offered.

Gourry and I shared a glance. If Kanzel had jumped us in the middle of a city, I wouldn't have been able to use my big spells... and while I hated to admit it, there was virtually no way I could've won like that.

Outdoors, though, with no one around? I could cast whatever I wanted. I *could* win this way! Probably. But...

"Why the change of scenery?" I asked as we followed after Kanzel.

The answer he gave surprised me: "I can't harm the people of the city."

Gourry and I both went wide-eyed. I could hardly believe my ears.

“That’s... very considerate of you.”

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I have orders to keep human casualties to a minimum, apart from you. That’s all. Granted, that human assassin I hired was rather indiscriminate in the pursuit of our goal...”

Aha. That explained why he just gave up and disappeared when I dove into the crowd of Alfred’s men back in the city. But if he wasn’t supposed to harm humans, why was he allowed to hire wholesale murderbots like Zuma? Demon logic, man. Who can understand it?

Nevertheless... this meant there was someone pulling the strings behind him after all.

“Whose orders?” I asked, still walking behind Kanzel. The idea of stabbing him in the back was super tempting, but even though we’d left the city, there were still plenty of civilians along the road. I couldn’t start a fight just yet.

“That man there... Gourry, was it? I intend to let him live, so I cannot answer your question.”

“Tch. Okay, fine. Let me try again: Why are you after me?”

“We don’t like you,” Kanzel responded without turning back.

“Well, obviously. But *why* don’t you like me? If you beat me in the fight to come, I’d like to know the reason I was killed. Or, if I pull off killing you instead, I feel like I’m entitled to an answer.”

“Certainly. I’d like to tell you, but for various reasons, I cannot.”

“The tough life of a lackey, huh?”

“Indeed.”

I was hoping to get under his skin, but he shrugged off my comment easily enough. Refusing to rise to my petty provocations... This guy was a tough nut to crack.

“Looks like we’ve still some time before we reach our battleground, so I might as well ask a few more questions

along the way. First, what happened to that assassin guy you hired, Zuma?"

"He disappeared after you two took both of his hands. That's all that I know."

He didn't seem to care at all. No time for failures, I guess.

"I think you came at me three times in the palace, but..."

"Yes. But I held back due to the location, and failed every time," Kanzel replied, turning onto a side path. Seemed we were getting closer.

"Now, those weird things you summoned the second time and the big bug the third time... where'd you pull those from?"

"The second time were bottom-tier demons. They cannot exist in this world under their own power, and so they possess beings of this world, transforming them in the process. I believe you refer to them as 'lesser demons.' What you saw is what they look like in the world they come from... Though I don't know exactly how they appear to human eyes."

Oho. So that's what lesser demons are... That explained why you could hurt them with physical attacks. This was all very educational. I could collate it into a report and sell it for a high price to some sorcerer's council somewhere.

Assuming I lived through the battle ahead, anyway...

"The third time was one of the magical beasts that sleeps in the magma beneath the Kravale Volcano. I think you saw its power for yourself."

"One of the magical beasts? You mean there's more of those things around?"

"Though I don't know how many exactly."

Whoaaaa... The world is truly vast.

"Do you have any other questions?" he asked.

I thought for a minute before answering, "Just one. I'm thinking no, but you weren't behind all that ruckus in Saillune, right? You weren't controlling Alfred or anything?"

"Certainly not. He sought a right hand to help execute his

plan, and I used a little magic to make myself the leading candidate, but nothing more.”

“I see. I trust you.”

“Do you?” Keeping pace, he then said, “Now, say your goodbyes to your companion. It’s nearly time.”

We’d reached a clearing—a large green field about the size of a city block. It popped up out of nowhere like a suddenly-recalled memory. The path cut through it, then disappeared again into the forest on the other side.

Naturally, there wasn’t a soul around. Even though we were in the middle of the woods, there wasn’t a single bird chirping or insect humming. Had they all departed, sensing the danger to come?

Kanzel stopped in his tracks, finally turning back to me for the first time.

“Nothing to say? No farewell?” he asked.

“I still think I can win,” I answered honestly.

“As you like. Then let us begin.”

Fwsh! On Kanzel’s cue, Gourry and I took off running through knee-high grass. There wasn’t much point in getting distance on Kanzel, who could blink at will. I just wanted some time to chant a spell. Gourry stuck right behind me, the Sword of Light already drawn.

Kanzel had yet to move from his initial position. Was he waiting to attack the moment I unleashed my spell? Either way, I had no choice but to try it... So why not open with a bang?!

“Ragna Blast!”

Fwoosh! A pillar of darkness rose up from an inverted pentagram that formed around the still unmoving Kanzel, then erupted with black plasma at its center! This spell was powerful enough to take out something like a brass demon in one hit, but...

“You appear quite skilled... for a human.” The plasma assailed him, yet Kanzel merely smirked. “You’ll have to do far better to harm me, however.”

The moment those words left his mouth, my dark pillar shattered!

“What?!” I found myself screaming as I stopped in my tracks.

Kanzel’s arm moved. He turned his hand toward me, shooting four thread-like streaks of magical light from his fingers.

“Not a chance!” Gourry shouted, diving in front of me.

He meant to shield me with his own body and cut through the incoming magical blasts with the Sword of Light!

“Gourry!” I cried.

But he stayed put. The magical light, however... Right before it hit him, it changed course!

Ah, if only I had time to dodge—

The four rays circled around Gourry and pierced through my legs! With a silent scream, I fell into the grass.

Kanzel had nailed the thighs and ankles of both my legs. The wounds themselves weren’t that serious—they weren’t even bleeding—but the slightest movement sent shooting pains through me. I could hardly do anything like this.

It seemed I’d underestimated this guy. Kanzel was stronger than I even imagined!

“Lina!” Gourry wailed, panic-stricken.

“I’m okay! It’s not that bad!” I said, forcing a smile.

“Of course not. I made sure of that,” said Kanzel, his voice different. There was something beneath his usual pristine tone. “I don’t intend to finish you off right away. I mean for your end to be one of excruciating agony or madness. Either way, it won’t be a quick death.”

I felt a chill race up my spine. I’d finally put my finger on it, the emotion lurking in Kanzel’s voice... It was exaltation.

This is crazy! Who gets their rocks off by torturing a person?!

“What’s wrong? You don’t seem pleased,” Kanzel said with a cold... no, a crazed smile.

No duh, bro! Who would be happy to hear they were

about to be tormented to death?!

At this rate, I didn't have a second to spare. I had to finish this guy off now, once and for all.

"Stop it! Why are you doing this?" Gourry demanded, fury writ across his face.

"Why?" Kanzel asked while slowly walking toward us. "Do you not know what demons consume to survive?"

Ah... I was stung with a terrible twinge of regret.

"The source of our power is miasma—the negative emotions produced by all living things. Fear, anger, sorrow, despair. It's the finest of delicacies to our kind! And the most effective way to procure it is through pain and suffering!"

Of course... When we fought in the city before, Kanzel had tried to kill me with one shot. That was because someone higher up the ladder had ordered him not to harm other humans, and Kanzel knew people were bound to show up if our fight went on too long. That was why he'd tried to finish me off before it could happen.

As for the reason he'd brought us out here... that was obviously, in part, to keep others from getting dragged into our fight. But it also seemed he meant to toy with me. In other words... Kanzel wanted to feast on my despair and fear, and Gourry's anger and sorrow.

But... that overconfidence would be his doom! I'd already finished chanting my spell!

"Dragon Slave!"

"What?! Damn—"

Fwoooooom! The red light consumed the demon and caused his body itself to explode!

Dragon Slave... The most powerful spell in the human repertoire called upon Shabranigdu, the Ruby-Eyed sovereign of all darkness in our world. Not even a powerful demon should be able to take one of these bad boys unscathed.

Mine had hit him head-on too, and at a time when he'd let his guard down completely.

"We did it, huh?" I said, shooting a wink at Gourry in spite of the pain in my legs.

"Yeah... You did," he replied, reaching for me where I lay in the grass.

"Oh, you did it all right..." came a raspy voice from behind him... from the lingering smoke. We froze up. "I really felt that one..."

It can't be...

At last, a humanoid figure slowly strolled out of the dissipating haze. No hair, no ears, no nose or mouth... The only things on the pallid, swollen flesh of his face were two wide-open eyes many times larger than a normal human's.

Kanzel! This must be his true form in our world. But... but...

He'd taken plenty of damage, sure, but how in the world was he still moving after a direct hit from a Dragon Slave?!

"You seem to have a poor impression of us demons," Kanzel said, his voice seeming to come from multiple directions. "Even if you call upon the power of Shabranigdu, it must still be channeled through a human's capacity. That might be enough to dispose of low-rank demons, but against a mid-rank demon like me? I won't say it did nothing, but it's obviously not enough to kill me in one blow."

"M-Mid-rank?!" I found myself raising my voice.

"Is this your first time seeing the real power of a demon? Or had you simply assumed you were unstoppable because you killed a number of lower-ranking ones?" he asked, still slowly approaching.

"Stay back!" Gourry howled.

With the Sword of Light at the ready, he put himself in Kanzel's path. He then swung his blade bravely...

"Out of my way!" the demon roared.

Kanzel swiped his extended left hand through the air, producing a magical shockwave. Gourry blocked it with his Sword of Light—but the shockwave won out!

Fwsh! Losing the metaphorical tug-of-war, Gourry went

flying... leaving nothing to separate me and Kanzel.

"Heh..."

With ecstasy in his eyes, Kanzel raised a hand toward me. Red magical light shot out of it! I screamed and writhed from the burning pain in my side.

"Stop it!"

Gourry came running, Sword of Light in hand. Another set of rays pierced my body, one after another. None of them hit my vital points. Kanzel was going out of his way to torture me, just like he'd promised.

The pain was making my consciousness hazy. As it faded on me, the attacks ceased.

Huh...?

And the moment it came back to me, the attacks resumed. This was seriously bad!

The next thing I knew, Gourry was upon us, slashing at Kanzel... But just before his brilliant blade made contact with the demon, something black congealed into a shield and defended him from every one of Gourry's swings.

"Stop it! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!" Gourry cried, hopeless and desperate as he whaled on Kanzel.

The demon, meanwhile, simply cackled.

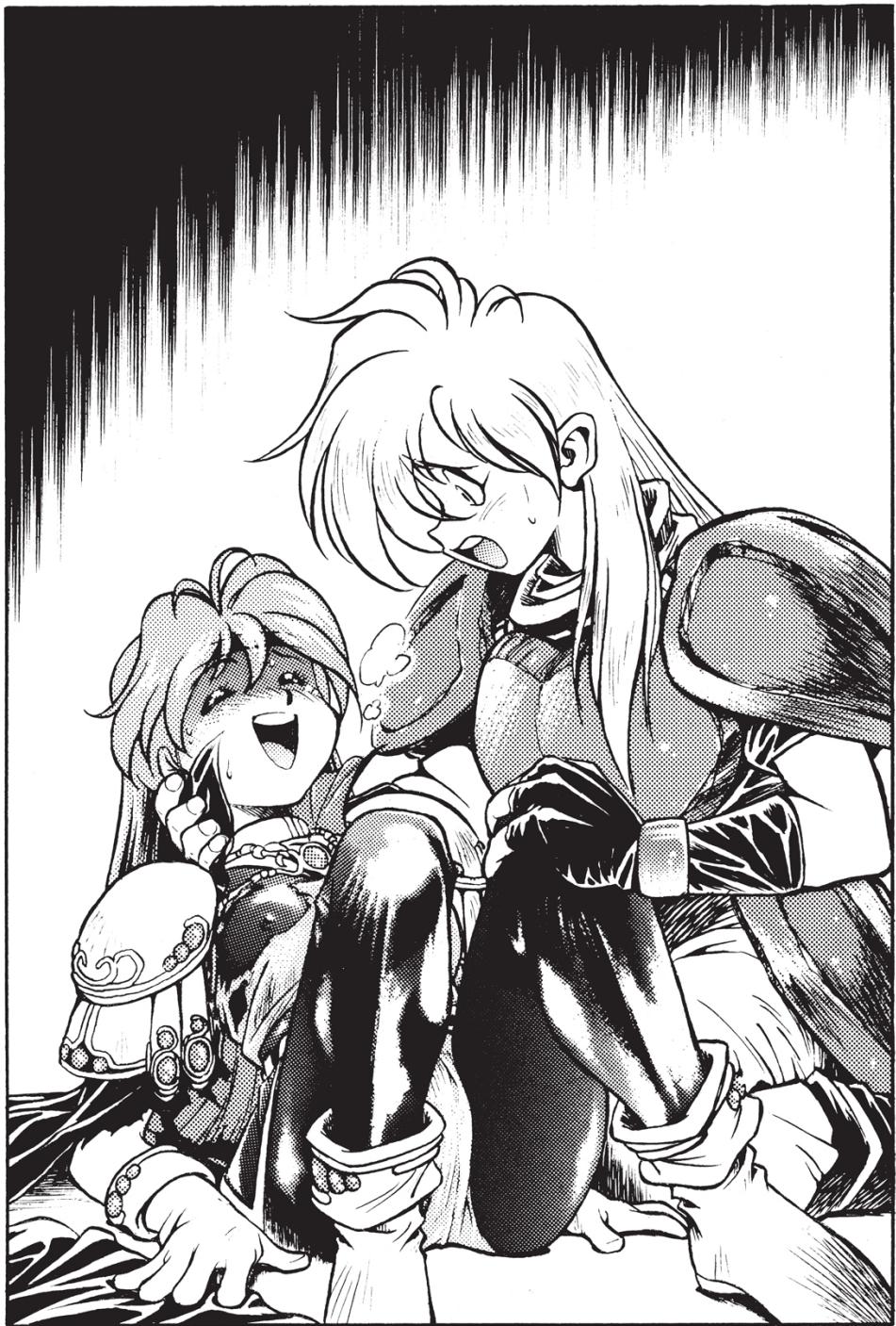
"Gwahahaha! I can feel it! Your anger, your anguish! What flavor! How exquisite! Gwahaha! Despair! Suffer!"

It might have gone on for moments, maybe minutes... I don't really recall. But the next thing I knew, I was in Gourry's arms and Kanzel was standing a little ways away. It seemed Gourry had managed to make his way to my side and physically shield me from Kanzel's attacks.

"Lina! Speak to me, Lina!"

"...Gourry..."

The slightest movement caused screaming pain to shoot through my body, but I wasn't in any mortal danger. I could still talk.



"Listen, Lina. You're going to have to use it," Gourry whispered into my ear so that Kanzel couldn't hear.

"Use... what?"

"That spell. Your most powerful one!"

Giga Slave...

I snapped back to myself. Gourry meant the strongest spell in existence, one that probably only I could use. It called upon the power of the Lord of Nightmares, a being even loftier than Shabranigdu. It was what I'd used to beat the Dark Lord when we fought him before. It was undoubtedly stronger than a Dragon Slave, and certainly enough to kill Kanzel. But...

"No," I said.

"Why not?!"

"I can't control it like this. It would kill us all..."

Those words struck Gourry dumb. If I failed to control the spell in question, the world itself could be destroyed... That's what someone had told me once. I wasn't sure if it was true or not, but I wasn't in a hurry to test the theory.

Either way, the spell still consumed a massive amount of life energy. If I used it now, whether it worked or not, it would likely be the end of me.

That left me only one choice...

"Isn't there anything we can do?!" Gourry asked in desperation.

"There is..." I replied.

"Then let's try it!"

Are you sure... you're okay just agreeing to it like that? I had to wonder. But if Gourry insisted, then it's what we would do.

"What do you need from me, Lina?!"

"Just defend me from him and put everything you've got into striking him with the Sword of Light like you did before."

"And then?"

"That's all."

"Got it," Gourry agreed with a firm nod before rising to his

feet.

"Finished your goodbyes?" Kanzel inquired.

Exaltation flashed in his eyes. With another swipe of his hand, Gourry was blown back again. I managed to bear the pain and sit up.

"Oh?" Kanzel murmured, impressed. "You have spirit. But I'll have you screaming again very soon."

I ignored his threat and began chanting once more.

Thou who art darker than twilight...

"Shabranigdu's spell again?" Kanzel mocked as Gourry managed to pick himself up and ready the Sword of Light.

Thou who art redder than lifeblood...

"Struggling to the end... It's unsightly. I'm disappointed."

I swear in thy exalted name...

"I can easily survive another blast or two," he boasted as Gourry charged him.

Obscured, deep in the flow of time...

"But they *do* hurt," he continued as Gourry raised his blade.

And make this pledge to darkness here:

"You're an annoyance. I think it's time I be rid of you," he declared, rebuffing the incoming Sword of Light with another conjured shield of darkness.

So all those in equal measure—

Kanzel then raised a hand, a light coalescing within it. Gourry raised his sword in kind.

Gah! I won't finish my chant in time!

Yet just then... a pillar of blue fire swallowed the demon!

"Gwaaaaagh!" Kanzel wailed in the moment.

That was... That was a Ra Tilt, the strongest astral spell in existence!

Kanzel whipped around at the unexpected attack and beheld a small figure—Lady Amelia!

I took the opportunity to finish my chant. All I had to do now was incant the words of power! I watched as Gourry raised the Sword of Light aloft, and...

“Dragon Slave!” I unleashed my spell.

“I told you, it’s pointless!” Kanzel cried.

Yet, before all our eyes... the sword flashed, its brilliant blade turning the color of blood.

“What—?!”

As the demon cried out, the blade of light bisected him top to bottom. He was unable to let out even a death rattle as Gourry cleaved him in two and Amelia sealed the deal with another Ra Tilt. Kanzel’s body turned to white powder, which was carried off by the wind before it ever hit the ground.

At last... it was over. I must have been so relieved, I lost consciousness in an instant.

“By the way, Lina, just what did you do back there?” Gourry asked.

I was lying in bed with nothing better to do one day after our battle with Kanzel. I’d apparently been carried off to the magical doctors of Saillune for treatment... again. I never seem to remember any of this stuff.

Incidentally, my supervising doctor this time was Master Grey. He apparently did shifts here too. He told me Sylphiel was still having fits in her sleep from time to time. Guess she hadn’t quite fully recovered. But all that aside...

My wounds were already healed and I was practically back in tip-top shape. I was on bedrest just to be on the safe side.

“Back there?” I dissembled.

“Yeah. The Sword of Light suddenly turned red, and I could cut through him easily. What was that all about?”

“Oh, I just cast my Dragon Slave on the Sword of Light. The sword channeled and amplified the spell, thus it cut through Kanzel’s defenses.”

“Ah, I get it.” He clapped his hands together... then seized up. “Hey, wait.”

“What?”

“Couldn’t that have blown the Sword of Light up?”

Huh, so he figured it out.

“Oh, well, you know! Heeheehee...”

“You can’t cutesy-pie your way out of this! That was a possibility, wasn’t it?!”

“Well, you’re the one who said ‘let’s just do it’ before I could explain! Besides, that sword withstood a Giga Slave! The odds were minuscule a Dragon Slave was gonna do anything to it.”

“How minuscule?”

“Like, fifty-fifty?”

“What?!”

“Just kidding! Definitely under 10 percent.”

That wasn’t an excuse or a white lie; it was my genuine estimate. Even for a legendary weapon, the Sword of Light seemed to far outstrip any human capacity... It seemed I still had a lot of research left to do on it.

“So... what was Kanzel’s deal with you, anyway?” Lady Amelia piped up. I had no idea what she was doing here.

“Oh, well, uh... apparently he was acting under someone’s orders,” I said, cocking my head.

At the very least, it was clear now that that said “someone” was neither the Dark Lord of the North nor Ruby-Eye Shabranigdu.

How do I know that, you ask? Simple. Kanzel said “Shabranigdu,” not “Lord Shabranigdu.” And he clearly wasn’t the rude, insubordinate type by nature... Which meant something complicated must be going down in the demon world.

“By the way, Lady Amelia... I thank you for saving me, of course, but what are you doing here?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” she said, waving her arms. “I persuaded my dad to let me leave the palace, and I asked all around before finally catching up with you guys! When I found you, Kanzel had you against a wall, so I cast a quick spell and—”

“No, I get all that,” I said, interrupting her. “I’m asking

why you came after us, and why you're still here."

"I told you already!" She cast a wink my way and then said, "There's something on the horizon, remember? And you seem to be connected to it. I wanna find out what it is, and if it's evil, I'll smash it with the hammer of justice!"

Amelia was on fire, ranting away in her own little world. It didn't really bother me, but I could imagine it was annoying the other patients.

Moreover, was it really okay to start a journey for such a vague reason? Then again, I have to admit I set off myself because my big sister back home told me to get out and see the world...

"Anyway, I'll be sticking with you guys from now on. It's a pleasure!" she declared as though it were no big deal.

"But shouldn't you ask Sir Phil—"

"I did. I told you, I persuaded him to let me out of the palace."

Geh. How do you persuade that guy about *anything*?

"You make it sound easy, Lady Amelia, but we have a hard fight ahead of us... Possibly a deadly one."

"I know all that! But I don't want to spend all my time as some sheltered princess in a palace. I want to devote myself to justice! To live a tumultuous life! Our candles should burn hot and bright! Oh... And since we're friends now, you should really just call me 'Amelia' without the whole 'Lady' business."

"I don't think there's any talking her out of it," Gourry said, somewhat startled.

Agh... my head hurts.

"Okay, now that that's decided, Mistress Lina—I mean, Lina—where are we headed next?"

I wasn't sure anything had been "decided" myself, but... oh well.

I'd been thinking about visiting home before we got sucked into all this drama, but it seemed I wasn't going to get the chance for that. I didn't know why they were after

me, but if there were demons messing around in my life, I was going to have to learn a lot more about them.

Thus our destination would be the land of dark legend... "To the Kingdom of Dils," I announced matter-of-factly.

Afterword

Scene: The Author and L

Au: The next volume of the reprint is out!

L: They're coming fast and furious, aren't they? So, we've talked it out, and starting with this volume, we'll be doing the afterwords together!

Au: There was a lot more to it than talking it out... though I won't say what!

L: You be quiet!

Au: Well, I have to say... I feel like there's someone left out and pouting when we do it like this.

L: Oh, you mean my subordinate, S? He does have precious little to do these days, but I plan to give him a whole afterword to himself soon. He'll deal.

Au: A whole afterword?! Well, I guess that might be okay given the rate at which these are coming out.

L: That's right. These rapid-fire reprints mean I get more screentime in the afterwords, so I can afford to be generous. Come to think of it, we should put them out even faster!

Au: Don't be ridiculous! I already have four books coming out in June and July each, thanks to this...

L: Four, eh? That is quite daunting. Are you sure about this, Fujimi Shobo?! If you put your trust in him, he'll disappoint you!

Au: That's not true! Though I am also wondering if it's going to be okay...

L: But four volumes means three reprints apiece, plus your other series and *Slayers Special* respectively, right?

Au: Yes... Wait, no!

L: Huh? It's not *Special*?

Au: Well, it is essentially volume 31 of *Special*. But we

changed the design format and the title because we thought newcomers from the anime might be intimidated by buying a 31st volume. So rather than *Slayers Special*, it's *Slayers Smash* now.

L: But it's more of the same, right?

Au: Yeah. It's the usual antics. I hope the readers keep enjoying it like always, despite the title change.

L: Are there any alterations or additions other than the title? No 1,200-page two-part hardcover bonus booklet about L's secrets?

Au: A 1,200-page booklet?! That would be bigger than the novels themselves!

L: Well, as a booklet, the paper would be half-size.

Au: That doesn't change anything! Also, if it's 1,200 pages long at half size, wouldn't it just look like a big paper cube?

L: Hmm... but I like the idea of a giant booklet. I think it would make the fans very happy. The first edition can come with high-class steak and crab!

Au: That would stink up the bookstores! Anyway, it's just a different title—that's it!

L: Hmm... Well, as long as it doesn't mean less of a spotlight on me, I don't care. Like with the huge afterward you let me do last time and whatnot.

Au: I didn't *let* you do that. Granted, it's fine for you to discuss the setting and things I do or don't want to explain. Like about Amelia, who debuts in this volume. Of course, we can't do that every time a new *Smash* comes out.

L: With Amelia, you mean that story about a certain family? Or the fact that her name hails from the highly self-righteous nation of Am***ca? Or that time you wrote side stories later on and started integrating her delivery from the anime?

Au: Yeah, that kind of stuff. I feel like maybe that should be in these reprints. Most of the backstories we explain aren't related to the short stories, but the novels.

L: What? You mean the weirdos who show up in the short stories *don't* have any tearjerker backstories?

Au: Of course not! I can't give backstories to characters that violate common sense, the setting, and even the laws of physics! Like the "good wife" Josephine... You try coming up with a backstory that explains why she's like that!

L: Hmm (thinking)... Oh! I know! Maybe she was a normal wife once. Then one night a meteorite falls in the mountains, so she goes out to find it herself... and she's different when she comes back!

Au: It implanted something in her?!

L: Nah, more like a parasite.

Au: Is that the default explanation behind *everyone* in the short stories?!

L: Yes. And?

Au: That's absurd! Lina would have bigger things to worry about than demons in a world like that!

L: Oh, that could be the third reveal! The tagline will be, "Everything's tedious now!"

Au: I'm not doing that! It really would make everything tedious!

L: We hope you keep enjoying the reprints, but look forward to the upcoming twist in *Slayers Smash*!

Au: No, stop! Don't close this out in a weird way!

Afterword: Over

Slayers 4

THE BATTLE OF SAILUNE



Sploosh!
Dozens of tentacles
flew out of the bowl!





A man stood in
the swirling blue fog...
Kanzel the sorcerer!

Bonus Translator/Editor Chat!

[Meg/ED]

Well, I think we last left off talking about how wonderful the food in Saillune is. But in truth, the city's got a lot more going for it than that!

The dang place is practically infested with intrigue. This volume is really interesting to me because we have not one, not two, but *three* bad guys hanging around.

[Liz/TL]

I thought you were going to say justice! But yeah, the villains have a lot of moving pieces on the board, don't they? Zuma, Kanzel, and the royal mastermind himself.

[Meg/ED]

Indeed. I suppose this volume is closest, then, to volume 2 in its setup, so perhaps it's fitting it fell into *Slayers NEXT*. But as I recall, we meet Amelia, Prince Phil, and even Uncle Randy way back in the early episodes of *Slayers*.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, that was really interesting to me. I remembered the "intrigue at the palace" storyline from *NEXT* fairly clearly, but until I rewatched Amelia's debut, I completely forgot that they'd used that storyline to integrate the "first time Lina met Phil" story Lina mentions in this volume. It's pretty clever organization, really. Since we don't have Sylphiel in the *NEXT* storyline, we at least get the "an innocent girl's dreams of meeting a stereotypical handsome prince are crushed" jokes from Lina in that first episode.

I'm a little curious if that storyline is ever covered in *Special*

or *Smash*, and if it does, how it differs from what the anime did.

[Meg/ED]

It was indeed a clever way to introduce them, and it was fun to see it in action... but the Randy bit kind of surprised me! Lina doesn't give us the whole story within the scope of volume 4, so it was interesting to see a full take on Randy. You can read between the lines in the novel and assume he was a would-be usurper as well, but the anime makes that explicitly clear.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, I figure it's one of those things the author mentioned in the last afterword, where he likes to throw in details that he may or may not ever actually explore, just to make the world feel more lived-in. It's unconventional in a world where "Chekhov's Gun" is frequently treated as an ironclad rule of fiction-writing, but it's really interesting once you get used to it, and I think it's something that enabled the anime adaptation to have a lot of flexibility in how it approached the storylines.

[Meg/ED]

I like it! And, now that I think about it, this isn't the first time we've had the anime fill in some gaps for us. It makes it particularly fun to follow alongside the books.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, although it creates some amusing contradictions if you try to reconcile them. The anime version of this plotline really makes Christopher a good guy... he abdicates his place in the line of succession when the threats to Phil grow serious, and when Alfred is revealed as the true culprit, there's no suggestion at all that Christopher egged him into it.

So there's even a scene where they're burying Alfred and Phil says something like "Such a shame, he'd never have done this if the demons hadn't gotten to him," and Christopher says something like "No, it was the evil in his own heart." So if you imagine that anime Christopher is the same as novel Christopher, that line comes off as hilariously weaselly. "Yeah, definitely just the evil in my son's heart! Nothing to do with how I raised him, la la la!"

[Meg/ED]

Pfft! The anime *is* a smidge heavy-handed when it comes to Al, methinks. (I even seem to recall the camera cutting to him when Lina and the gang first show up going, "Who could be behind all this?!") Whereas, I have to admit, the book actually had me going for a bit.

And poor Chris... I liked that the anime imagined him as a good guy, but it did make him a little one-dimension at the end. I mean, versus the scene where he has to face his own (non-literal) demons and deal with Al himself. That was just tragic—in a painfully humanizing kind of way.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, in the book you get this idea that these tensions have existed for a long, long time; everyone in the palace is pretty sure Chris must be the one behind all this because of this sort of off-camera tension between him and Phil. But in the anime they all appear to be a very close, loving family, and Lina's initial suspicions of Chris are kind of an outlier opinion.

So when Alfred is revealed as the culprit it's a much more shocking betrayal. Of course, there's less room to make this a parable about toxic ideology in *NEXT*, because it's working to integrate this episode into the overarching plotline a bit more strongly—to the point of fusing it with the plotline of the next novel in places!

[Meg/ED]

Yup. Speaking in broad strokes, I think the anime somewhat undercuts the tragedy of this volume in service of furthering the combo-plot (which is perfectly in line with other directorial choices we've seen thus far). The demons use the royal family drama as a springboard for a certain machination, which is a whole other can of worms in the novels... There's lots to chew on here! Suffice to say, I suppose, that intrigue begets intrigue. The demons and their exact motivations are something we'll be exploring more in the volumes to come.

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, and if you're coming in from the anime you'll see some familiar elements that were absent in this volume finally come into play next time. And, on the plus side, we finally get Amelia! I gotta give the anime credit for giving us mass quantities of wholesome Amelia/Phil content.

[Meg/ED]

All hail JUSTICE! 'Cause we're gonna need some of it in short order. But before we officially move on to volume 5, is there anything else you'd like to touch on here in volume 4?

[Liz/TL]

Well, this talk of our favorite pratfaller has me reflecting on the sheer amount of *Sploosh!* and *Wham!* content we see in this volume, you know? Light novels are no stranger to those kinds of in-line sound effects, and it's always a decision we have to make, to write around them or leave them in. In this case, I think we agreed that for the kind of story *Slayers* was, it was better to leave them in in most cases.

[Meg/ED]

I, for one, am a sucker for some quality slapstick, and Amelia is a goldmine in that regard. A good, hearty *Splat!* is just a

lot more visceral, don't you think?

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, in other novels you might write around it a bit more, something like "She fell to the ground with a splat!" or "With a bloosh, the interdimensional monster burst out of the soup bowl!" and that would be okay. But there's something a little inherently comic book-y about the writing in *Slayers*, I think, with Lina's snarky monologue and all. And so I like to keep those sound effects when I can, to give you that immediate visual and preserve the rhythm of the writing.

[Meg/ED]

Haha, yeah. I think it's especially fun with Lina as a narrator, because the *Wham!* interjections and such feel pretty authentic to first-person storytelling. (I could easily imagine her actually telling us this story aloud, embellishments and all.)

[Liz/TL]

Yeah, it really feels like she's acting it out for the camera, right? It makes things a little funny in the editing process, though... Sometimes I write down a sound effect, and I find you've replaced it with a slightly different spelling of the same sound effect. So I've been dying to know, as an editor... how do you know how many Os to put in 'rooooooar'?

[Meg/ED]

Coming from a manga background, I have a lot of experience with written sound effects, onomatopoeia, and the like. I try to be as descriptive as possible with them, especially in novels where we don't have too many accompanying visuals. And, funnily enough, I actually have a rule of thumb for repeating vowels.

You sort of get diminishing returns, so in general, I think less

is more. I typically stick to three, five, or eight, depending on the context and severity of the situation. (I think the most I've ever used was eleven in an over-the-top case like a death scene.) It gives a sense of consistency without risking chunky line breaks and whatnot.

[Liz/TL]

Innnteresting...

[Meg/ED]

It's funny, though, because there are always exceptions (and instances where "the rules" are broken for comedic or dramatic effect). For example, words that use a double vowel to begin with—like, let's say, "bwoosh"—need extra consideration because using three Os would just look like a typo.

[Liz/TL]

That's true, I never thought about that. I guess you go right to five then? Or is a bwoosh always a bwoosh?

[Meg/ED]

I'd say "bwoosh" is pretty powerful on its own, but you *can* have particularly pronounced or drawn-out instances (e.g. super-explosions or long gusts of wind). Then we can also get into the nuance of weighing a "bwoosh" against a "kablooey" or something. This is high-brow editorial stuff, I tell you.

[Liz/TL]

It's important! The sound effects in manga matter a whole lot, and in that respect we get off easy. *Slayers* has never asked us to represent the sound of someone being intimidating, for which I am very grateful.

[Meg/ED]

Ah, the sound of silence is a personal favorite of mine. But on the whole, I think sound effects are representative of the whole editing process for me. They have to pass muster on two counts: Do they look, sound, and feel right? And do they convey the right meaning?

(There's a comical moment of every workday for me where I'm just sitting at my desk muttering "Whoom!", "Vwoom!", and "Whoosh!" to myself...)

[Liz/TL]

And does it convey JUSTICE?! ...Well, I guess that's mainly applicable for Amelia, but still.

[Meg/ED]

Forget trees in the forest! What does a JUST punch to the face sound like?!

All joking aside, working on this series really is a ton of fun.

[Liz/TL]

It is a lot of fun. And next volume we'll finally get to... the most fun? Well, that's debatable. But I have a lot of fun writing him, at least!

[Meg/ED]

At last, the elusive you-know-who! I can't wait to get into more detail on him.

[Liz/TL]

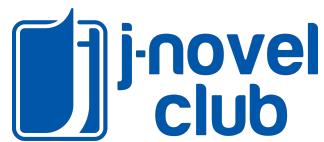
Yeah, we've got our main cast together and now we're champing at the bit for volume 5, when the plot really starts a-rolling! So I guess there's nothing more to say but, see you then?

[Meg/ED]

I'll be sure to have my DIY bag-mask ready for next time!

[Liz/TL]

I'm just gonna get the roller for all the animal hair on the couch.



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by Hajime Kanzaka

Translated by Elizabeth Ellis
Edited by Megan Denton

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